ADA 61 The Unifying Force

Sixty-One
[o-o-[I]-o-o]

Cato Neimoidia, a swirling sphere of sapphire and white against the glowing backdrop of stars, moonless, and at the moment, friendless, in the Yuuzhan Vong-held territory of the Colonies region,was a far cry from the once prosperous regional capital it had once been. Following Nal Hutta and Coruscant, and preceding Bastion, Cato Neimoidia was simply one of the many proud and vibrant centers of power to join an ever-growing graveyard of planets caused by the four year war with the Yuuzhan Vong.

Its rich mineral and ore resources, and dealings with droids, had made it a natural target for the technology-hating alien invaders. Its position in the galaxy also made it a staging ground for Yuuzhan Vong assaults on other important systems such as Commenor. Occupied for the better part of the past two years, Cato Neimoidia hadn't escaped the worldshaping that had dramatically changed planets such as Wayland and Coruscant. The great, sprawling bridge cities which the planet was famous for were mostly empty and overgrown in Yuuzhan Vong plant life. Instead, the population of the planet lived day in and out in massive holding pens and concentration camps spread across Cato Neimoidia's vast plains. Yuuzhan Vong structures dotted the planet, both civilian and military, and a sizable Yuuzhan Vong fleet was stationed in orbit.

Naturally, such a reinforced position also served as a major base of operations for the shapers who served under Shimrra. An entire bridge city had been converted into a research base, with supporting damuteks and spires rising up from the surface all around it. Within the vast array of structures, inorganic and living, the shapers were hard at work refining the viruses originally conceived by Domain Rin and the Remnant. It didn't hurt that the local population was genetically similar to the Duro, one of the many races in opposition to Shimrra. Nor did the lack of access to Duro deter the warriors from eagerly watching the painful deaths of the Neimoidians in the holding pens.

It was clear that if given a chance, the research facility would provide more than its fair share of trouble for the Galactic Alliance in the run up to the final battle.

"Not exactly the homecoming I was hoping for," Vale whispered, her face drawn at the sight of so many Yuuzhan Vong structures below. She was in a Yuuzhan Vong cruiser; the living ship's thick scalely plating used for space having retracted once the vessel had entered

the atmosphere, giving everyone a clear view of the green and brown world below.
Parts of Twin Suns and Barefoot squadron—those with ground-based combat experience—were packed into a hijacked Yuuzhan Vong cruiser as part of a massive supply-convoy, unbeknownst to the rest of the ships in the convoy. The strike team's sole purpose was to blow apart said research facility before it could become any more problematic.
Two dozen people, Jedi, stormtroopers, and Galactic Alliance commandos alike shared their current position in the hold of the cruiser. Stealth was the key this time, as neither side could afford the casualties that would doubtlessly occur in a pitch-battle.
They were also aided by General Antilles, Tenel Ka, and Grand Admiral Pellaeon, whose fleets were raiding nearby planetary yammosks and supply bases to draw away the sizable Yuuzhan Vong garrison in the system. Seff served as the battlemeld coordinators in the fleet, while Tesar served as the strike-team's anchor. Being the last shaping facility on a list procured by the prisoners at Selaris and elsewhere, the base on Cato Neimoidia was on high alert and the strike team would need all the luck they could get.
"I know, I'm sorry," Jaina said in response to Vale's forlorn expression.
Vale exhaled and hung her head. "And it hurts knowing that my people only going to suffer all the more once we leave. To be this close…never mind, I shouldn't be thinking like this."
"Was your family able to make it off planet before the Vong got here?" Twin Suns Eleven, Tilath Keer, asked.
"I'm sure I have more than a few relatives in one of those camps," Vale gestured helplessly. "The Neimoidian government tried to negotiate with the Vong after Coruscant fell, reassuring everyone that their negotiations wouldn't fail. You can see where that got us."
"Negotiate? Even after everything they'd seen the Yuuzhan Vong do?" Major Pallin of the Imperial Remnant asked. He had been a part of Ganner and Moff Sarreti's covert taskforce and had seen firsthand what the Yuuzhan Vong and their allies were capable of.
"Didn't you Imperials try that too?" Galactic Alliance commando, Judder Page said in partial defense of Vale. As someone who fought the Empire his entire life, Judder wasn't quite ready to give up his decades' old views of the former galactic power. "Didn't really go so well either."
"If I recall, your former Chiefs of State both tried to negotiate as well," Colonel Vana Dorja retorted in her trademark dry tone. "At least we managed to keep our idiot leaders alive. Both your former heads of state, that Bothan and the Quarren, weren't as fortunate. But it is a good question, did your leaders think negotiations would work?"

Vale shrugged once more. "My people are not fighters, not by a long shot. We didn't stand a chance without any New Republic reinforcements and most of us knew it. Only the richest and best connected of us got out with more than just the clothes on our backs. And even then, it was everyone for themselves. For the most part, in our culture, family takes a back seat to profit and one's own self-interest. So when the Vong came, anyone who was still someone and hadn't managed to get away, up and surrendered in hope for mercy."
"*All units prepare to disembark, we have been granted a berth in the adjacent military base. A no-fly zone has been instituted around the research city, only passage on foot is allowed. I've invoked a quarantine protocol to keep the regular attendants away. You'll have fifteen minutes to get outside the base perimeter in that time."*
The strikeforce all winced.
"We knew this wouldn't be easy," Jaina said with a grim smile. "Plan B it is."
"Yipee," Tahiri said in a dry voice. "Nothing beats tromping through several kilometers of forest and open fields on a recently-shaped planet full of die-hard zealots who want to kill us."
"Looking for a not-so-secret weapon that will kill us in a very agonizing way within minutes of exposure," Zindra added, donning the headpiece for her forest-camouflaged combat environmental suit.
"Kids these days," Judder shook his head, deadpan. "Where's your sense of adventure."
"We're going to a Neimoidian city converted into one giant shaper base, isn't that adventure enough?" Jaina protested.
"Besides," Zindra protested. "It's the Intelligence divisions that want us to procure samples from the place before we blow it up. We would have been perfectly fine vaping the place apart from our snubfighters, but *someone* decided it was smarter to infiltrate the place."
All eyes turned to Colonel Dorja, who just blinked back at them impassively.
A round of weak chuckles and head shakes broke out as the strike team gazed back down at the approaching military base. Rows and rows of warriors were boarding dropship after dropship to be sent off to the frontlines. Deadly-looking creatures were herded into another vessel, while slaves and prisoners being sent off to Coruscant to be sacrificed in some ceremony were all trapped helplessly within giant holding pens.
Their Freed Yuuzhan Vong pilot drifted their cruiser to a far landing pad as the rest of the convoy landed closer to the main facility. The strike team quickly piled onto the three *rakamat* grazing on the feedbins

within the ship's hold. The portable, coral shelters atop the massive siege beasts were perfect for hiding their presence from any prying eyes.
"I've definitely missed Little Bantha," Tahiri grinned, patting her 'pet' *rakamat* that she had picked up on Borleias as she climbed atop its back. "He's grown quite a bit since I last saw him."
"Definitely brings back memories," Jaina laughed, climbing on top of a second *rakamat*.
A brave unit of Freed Yuuzhan Vong warriors piled on after the commandos, serving as the visible pilots of the giant lumbering creatures. Several more mounted quadrupedal lizard-like creatures as escorts, while another group tended to the quartet of magma spitters that would also be accompanying the strike team.
The cruiser rumbled as it finally made contact with the ground, the organic hangar expanding slightly as the ship seemed to exhale. Several membrane walls rippled, and then parted, allowing daylight in.
"See you all at the final stop," Jaina gave a brief salute to the rest of the group. She retreated back into the shelter, and their Freed Yuuzhan Vong allies guided the large beasts out into the open field. There they joined the beasts of burden from the other ships, and together, they began their long trek out to the Shaping compound.
[o-o-[II]-o-o]
Nom Anor stared impassively out at the expanse of land from the top-most spire of one of Cato Neimoidia's once proud bridge cities. Now completely taken over by Shimrra's shapers, all of whom were buying into the lie that was the Eighth Cortex and profanely working on creations that compared Yuuzhan Vong biots and infidel technology, the bridge city had been radically transformed.
Slaves were being used to man its shields and turbolaser batteries, while newly installed yaret-kor were growing into the rocky arch that held the city up. The city was already being dubbed a 'Shaper's paradise' by those who were dwelling in it, and the various creatures that roamed its vacant streets was a testament to the flourishing of once forbidden shaping techniques.
And he hated the city with a passion. It was as if Shimrra was deliberately spitting into the faces of the gods by sanctioning such a mix of technologies. As if Shimrra had forgotten what being Yuuzhan Vong meant. Nom Anor could easily see such a city existing under the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, but not under Shimrra. Yet the evidence was right beneath his feet.
"It has been a week since the infidels attacked the last shaping facility. What makes you so certain they will come here?"

And there was the other reason he hated the city—his leash.
"The infidels, the Jedi in particular, are single-minded creatures," Nom Anor explained, turning around to face the abomination that was one of Shimrra's Slayers. The black-skinned creature was still missing a chunk of his cheek, and appeared completely ambivalent to the pustule infection that had set in. "Once they establish a pattern, especially one that yields results for themselves, they will continue using that pattern until defeated. It is what it was with the New Republic under their original leader, and it is what doomed their Admiral Kre'fey in the end."
"And what of the reports of raids on yammosks throughout the neighboring sectors? Why must you keep our forces here when they can be used to repel those attacks?"
Nom Anor allowed a grimace of irritation to cross his features. The Slayer was like a newborn child, forever questioning. Though its creators had assured him that it learned at an exponential rate, Nom Anor had neither the time nor patience to cater to its young mind. Unfortunately, Shimrra had made it clear that he was to teach the Shaper all he knew about scheming and battle plans. "This planet is to be the death of Jaina Solo and Tahiri Kwaad, Slayer. We will allow them to land, to enter this facility, but they will not be able to leave. Should we die here, the fleet command is under orders to raze the entire planet. If we send the fleet away, there is a chance the Jedi can escape."
The villip choir by the window trilled and Nom Anor used the interruption to step away from the Shaped creature that was not even as tall as he was. "Speak."
"Executor, the weekly supply convoy of Shaping materials and slaves approaches from the west."
Nom Anor frowned. "They are a day early."
"Is there a problem?"
"I do not like it when things do not go according to schedule, sub-commander."
"Then shall I have my men intercept the convoy and turn it around?"
"Yes…wait," Nom Anor's eyes glittered. "No. Let them come. Keep your men out of sight."
"It is the attack you have been expecting?"
"There is a high possibility," Nom Anor nodded. "The time between the last attack and this one fits, and those convoys are the only way they could approach without engaging the fleet. Subtly alert the main base's commander and have yorik-et standing by. When the convoy

arrives, instruct the shapers to act as they usually would and unload the supplies."
"As you command." The warrior bowed his head, and then the villip reverted to its passive state.
The Slayer closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. When his ruby-red eyes opened once more, they were dark with anger. "The *Jeedai*. I can feel them. There are *Jeedai* on this planet."
Nom Anor let out a low breath. "Then it appears as if our trap is about to be sprung."
"You will stay here Executor," the Slayer growled. "My brothers and I shall slay the *Jeedai* for Shimrra."
"By all means," Nom Anor gestured apathetically, watching impassively as the Slayer disappeared through the sliding doors of the office. He then reached for the villip cluster again. "Master Shaper, the time has come. Let loose everything you have and we shall see if the gods have blessed or cursed your foul creations."
"As you command, Executor."
When the villip reverted, Nom Anor smoothly set aside the cluster and exited the room. He ignored the few Yuuzhan Vong in the hallways as he made his way to the top of the building. Though the next few hours would determine whether he would return to Yuuzhan'tar a hero, or would have to once more disappear into the shadows, he always prepared himself for the worst. That was how he had survived the war thus far, by having backup plans backing up his backup plans.
He approached a small structure on the roof, disguised as part of the metal and duracrete building, and stroked the camouflaged membrane on the side. A hidden wall opened. Inside the structure was a Yuuzhan Vong fightercraft, custom grown to his specifications. It was his escape route should things go wrong.
With shaking hands, he settled into the command chair and donned the fighter's cognition hood. Its senses had been attuned to the many Yuuzhan Vong lifeforms that were scattered about throughout the bridge city. This enabled him to watch everything that was happening from the relative safety of his ship.
Though he had every confidence in his plan, the fact that Shimrra had let the Slayers take over and ruin it ate away at Nom Anor's stomach lining. The Slayers were little better than the blunt instruments that were the countless warriors that made up Shimrra's army. They couldn't possibly understand the intricacies and subtly needed for such a plan to succeed. And yet, if the Slayers failed, it would be his fault, there wasn't much he could do about that.

He let out a long, slow, breath as he synced himself up with his ship's perceptions, the wide expanse of the bridge city now laid out before him.
"Come, Jaina Solo, Tahiri Kwaad," Nom Anor murmured. "And we shall see if Shimrra's *Jeedai* are truly capable of slaying gods."
[o-o-[III]-o-o]
"Ah, Loronar," Corran Horn muttered. "I'm actually surprised the Vong kept the planet in one piece."
"They're certainly waiting for trouble," Kyp replied in turn, studying the revolving sphere of purples, blues, and browns through the Yuuzhan Vong supply-ship's senses.
"Remind me to thank Wedge for sending you, the others, and those Mandalorians over to us," Corran exhaled. There was nothing like sailing into the heart of a massive enemy fleet knowing that one misstep meant the difference between life and a very short and fiery future. He was almost glad that all he could see was the organic walls of the relatively defenseless ship he was in. "Although whether we'll actually make it to the surface still remains to be seen.
Not only was Loronar on a major hyperspace route and was normally heavily defended at all times, it was also the last planet on the list of targets for the Corellian-arm of the taskforce. The Yuuzhan Vong fleet in the system was battle-hardened and bristling with unique-looking vessels and creatures that no doubt meant trouble. It was fortunate that the joint Freed Yuuzhan Vong-Mandalorian-Jedi-Corellian/Duro strike team had likewise chosen to utilize stealth for their mission; at least, for their initial approach.
Their target was a Yuuzhan Vong shaper facility situated on the outskirts of Loronar's capital city. The site itself had once been a planetary shipyard for Loronar Corporation—a company known for producing both droids and starships—and the remains of the giant metal biers could still be made out beneath the mass of Yuuzhan Vong plant-life like funeral monuments for a company long gone. The shapers had moved in and set up shop all around the sprawling shipyards, with Freed Yuuzhan Vong Intelligence reporting that it was the shapers' job to better learn how 'infidel' ships were made and produced.
Off to the side of the sprawling shaping compound was a giant concentration camp for the populace of Loronar's capital city, with several hundred thousand living beings crammed into a space that could only comfortably accommodate half as many people.
To make matters harder, a planetary yammosk was living at the very center of the shaping facility, surrounded by battle-hardened warriors

and anti-air turrets ready for almost anything. As if that and the fleet and orbit wasn't enough, the next threat came from the full-fledged military base in the center of the capital city, able to lend aid to the shaping compound in a matter of minutes.
Unlike the mission on Cato Neimoidia, not only did this strike team have to destroy the shaping compound and recover samples of the virus for study, but they also had to destroy the planetary yammosk as well. Fortunately, their way off the planet came in the form of a Freed Yuuzhan Vong ship secreted away. Unfortunately, they had to achieve all their objectives first.
"If things go wrong, we're not going to last very long," Valin said, sharing his father's pessimism.
"It'll work out," Kyp said, holding out his hands on either side of his chair.
"Those look new," Yaqeel said, pointing a finger out at the distant bulkhead wall. The cognition hood over her head meant that only she and those sharing their Yuuzhan Vong ship's senses, could actually see what she was referring to.
The ship's Freed Yuuzhan Vong pilot, nodded. "They are. Some sort of modified yorik-et."
"New coralskippers?" Dinua Jeban said, her voice distorted by her helmet's speaker system.
"Looks like it," Yaqeel nodded from her chair.
"[They're slightly larger than a usual 'skip. Almost look like voxyn]," Lowbacca growled in a low tone.
"We knew the Yuuzhan Vong would eventually pull out some sort of new trick to turn the tide of the war," Doran offered.
"It's probably a good thing we're going with this plan. I don't think the Bakurans would appreciate it if we got their new ships shot up so soon," Jysella chimed in.
Kyp rolled up his sleeves and removed his cognition hood. "Right, who came up with this plan again?"
"They did." Everyone pointed to Doran, Sannah, and the squad of Mandalorian Supercommandos behind them.
Corran and Kyp exchanged ever-suffering glances. "Don't you miss the days when we actually had some sort of say in what would happen?"
Corran nodded glumly. "And to think those days were only a short time ago."
"Don't worry," Dinua said. "This will be fun."
"You and I have very different definitions of fun," Kyp wagged a finger at her.

"We are approaching the drop-point now," the Yuuzhan Vong pilot said in Basic. "Position locked. Holding high orbital position over the shaper compound. May the Yun'o watch over you."
"I really can't believe we're actually doing this," Jysella gulped as she and Yaqeel made their way over to a mass of yorik-coral and metal in the ship's hold. It was just large enough to fit her in the center of it and appeared to be bristling with both laser and plasma cannons.
A brainchild of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong shapers, several innovative Mandalorians, and some of the same techs who had worked on the creation of the *Veila,* the drop-pods were an ugly, unappealing mess and had been designed that way. Heavily armored and armored, the only systems the pods had were maneuvering-thrusters, a crude sensor system, inertial dampeners, and fire-controls.
"Only the Mandalorians would think of something crazy like this," Yaqeel breathed, snapping on a self-contained breather over her mouth before climbing into her own pod.
"[Or Anakin!]" Lowbacca barked from across the hold.
"Anakin Solo would have you guys drop down onto a hostile planet in modified drop-pods covered in yorik coral?" Jintar asked, comfortably settling into his pod. Unlike the pods of the Jedi and commandos, the Mandalorian drop-pods were much larger, much taller, and much, much heavier. Contained within them was a special surprise the Mandalorians had brought along to 'liven up' the battlefield.
"[He would have had us drop down onto a hostile planet <u>without</u> said drop-pods]." Lowbacca replied over the comlink.
"Is he really that crazy?" one of the Corellian commandos going with them asked.
"*Definitely,*" Kyp laughed aloud. *"Okay people, system's check. It's a hundred kilometers to the surface and we don't need you all making a bigger crater than necessary. This is Drop Leader, all systems are green."*
"*Drop Two, we're a go."*
The team of two-hundred commandos reported in in-turn.
"Mando Twelve, go," Doran finished up the roll call.
"I almost feel sorry for those Vong down there," Dinua said dryly. "They're never going to know what hit them."
"All units, drop!" Kyp said curtly.
As the Yuuzhan Vong cargo ship swept through the thermosphere, counting on the friction and heat its re-entry created to distort its gravity profile, its hold opened up. Two-hundred individual pods were released in unison, the rockets on top of them flaring and taking them through the thermosphere in record time. Several dozen kilometers

later, their weapons opened fire in a hail of red and yellow as the pods continued their near-ballistic course towards the ground. The cargo ship pulled away, while the pods hit terminal velocity and streaked down to the planet below like super-heated meteors.
"Never doing this again!" Sannah screamed. *"Doraaaaan!"*
"Sorry! The....idea...sounded...good...in...my...head," Doran managed to get out over the intense vibrations shaking his drop-pod.
"I'm too old for this, I'm too old for this," Corran's chant could be heard over the comm-system.
"I'm too young to die!" Jysella whimpered.
"[I take it back, this is exactly like one of Anakin's plans!]" Lowbacca yowled.
"Now this is how you fight a war!" Dinua yelled, elation in her voice as her battle drop-pod spiraled in a seemingly out-of-control drop. Everything beneath it several dozen kilometers down was already feeling the effects of the first bombardment of super-heated energy. The two-hundred drop pods continued their blistering assault, glassing the ground they were rapidly approaching. The Yuuzhan Vong below truly had no idea what had hit them. One moment it was business as usual, if only a slightly higher alert level—and the next it was raining molten rock and intense beams of focused energy. Damuteks ignited in flame and yorik coral structures melted under the withering bombardment. The few coralskippers that were scrambled had no chance of catching up with the plummeting drop-pods without crashing to the ground themselves.
And then the pods themselves began to land. Single-use rockets flared, slowing their descent at the last moment, but only just. The heavy pods slammed into the ground with deafening thuds, sending up thick clouds of dust into the air and shaking the surface with every impact. Some plowed straight through the remains of the structures they had bombarded, while others squashed groups of warriors who had tried to take it out from below. One by one, all two hundred pods plowed into the ground, dozens of meters apart; the Yuuzhan Vong base they had landed in looking a lot worse for wear.
Several Yuuzhan Vong warriors made to rush the first few pods that landed.
The outer yorik-coral shells of the pods dropped away, and suddenly great gouts of liquid blue flame sprayed the area surrounding the pods in all direction. The first warriors on the scene were promptly incinerated, and those splashed with the flaming liquid howled in agony before they were completely consumed by the burning flames.

The hellish torrent lasted for only a couple of seconds, but it was enough to set the surrounding base ablaze in crackling flame.
And then the walls of most of the other drop-pods exploded outwards, mowing down any nearby warrior who was still standing.
Through the thick smoke of the burning base, there was a vibrant hum, and a line of lightsabers activated. The Jedi led the charge of Corellians and Galactic Alliance commandos as blasters opened fire on the remains of the shell-shocked forces of the base's security.
In the meantime, giant hulking shadows had molted the walls of the Mandalorian pods and rose up out of the swirling smoke around them. Heavily armored, metallic claws emerged, followed by metallic heads bristling with all sorts of plasma and laser weaponry. Thirty-six of these five-meter high wasp-like tanks shook themselves free of their drop-pods and straightened to their fullest height, hovering several meters above the ground. The Yuuzhan Vong who had moved to challenge these seemingly inert pods all looked up at the floating droids in complete fear.
The sound of lasers and plasma being rapid-fired all across the base followed shortly after, near deafening as the hulking silhouettes of the Mandaloran-supplied weapon annihilated columns of Yuuzhan Vong warriors with near impunity. It was a combination of Mandalorian humor, and the fact that most of the Mandalorian war-machine had been destroyed on Mandalore, that had resurrected the Basilisk wardroid once more. What better way to combat technology and droid-hating aliens than by setting the most dangerous droid to ever exist on them.
The Jedi and other ground forces, escorted by the Mandalorians, quickly regrouped and moved on to their mission objectives. Once the shock wore off, they knew that things would get much more difficult.
[o-o-[IV]-o-o]
"Warmaster."
Nas Choka glanced at his subordinate. "Speak."
"Warmaster, the infidels have launched a new offensive. Their fleets are launching raids on planets with yammosks, while another attacks the shaper compound on Lorodan. Several other shaper damutek have already fallen."
"And what of Nom Anor?"
"He has yet to report, Warmaster."
Nas Choka's thin lips curled into a sneer. "That is to be expected of the worm."
"Shall I send reinforcements to Lorodan?"

"No. Zhat Lah is more than competent enough," Nas Choka shook his head.
The shaper compounds weren't very important to him in the long run anyways. They had been a means to an end, but they weren't the only means at his disposal. Surrounding Domain Choka's Worldship was nearly two-thirds of all available Yuuzhan Vong warships, including the new ones fresh out of the Deep Core shipyards. If they couldn't purge the watery world through shaping, then they would do so through flame and plasma. With the forces at his disposal, there was no doubt that they had the capacity to completely overwhelm and annihilate the enemy defenders. The fact that the infidels were spread throughout the galaxy attacking shaper compounds because of the sheer threat they posed only helped him in the end. The more ships spread throughout the galaxy, the less his forces would face above Mon Calamari. "We need all available forces for this final assault on the infidel capital. Once Mon Calamari falls, their new offensive will grind to a halt. We cut off the head, and the body dies."
"As you say, Warmaster."
"And the status of the fleet?"
"We are nearly ready, Warmaster," a second attendant replied. "By the end of the tomorrow, all ships will have arrived and be ready for the journey. We anticipate arrival at the enemy capital system in five days."
"And has the Supreme Overlord sent any further instructions?"
"No, Warmaster. He continues to consolidate his power on Yuuzhan'tar. He has begun to purge the lower levels of the planet of their inhabitants."
"The heretics?"
"Yes. Reports from the fleet elements above Yuuzhan'tar suggest that the casualties among the traitorous vermin are reaching the tens of thousands. The Supreme One is even having his fleet bombard areas suspected of harboring the heretics."
Nas Choka struggled to keep his preferred choice of words in. It sounded as if Shimrra had truly lost his mind. Not only was the Warmaster rushing this deceive battle before their own territory was secure, but now the man was burning up the very planet that was supposed to be their new home. If Shimrra was anyone else, Nas Choka would say that the man was panicking. How else would one be able to explain Shimrra's sudden flurry of reckless and dangerous choices?
Instead of voicing his own doubts, however, Nas Choka quirked his lips upwards in a sneer. He was, after all, the Warmaster and loyal servant

of Shimrra regardless of the commands he received. "Very good, then we shall have a vermin-free planet to return to after our victory."
His subordinates all clasped their fists to their chests. "To victory."
"The battle for their capital planet will be one that will be remembered for millennia to come. Return to your ships and go over your check lists again. I want all to be in readiness and to return with as many of you as possible."
"We obey, Warmaster. *Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"*
[o-o-[V]-o-o]
"That's…a very big base," Zindra whispered, eyes wide at the sight approaching them. They were still a good distance away, but there was no missing the organic, urban sprawl seemingly rising from the ground as they drew nearer.
"We're going to need more explosives," Tahiri agreed, green eyes wide in shock. "Or a ballistic asteroid."
"The Freed Vong did say the base was huge," Judder Page added. "Maybe we should have had them define huge."
In addition to the bridge city that spanned nearly ten kilometers between a massive rocky archway several kilometers in the air, a literal city of Yuuzhan Vong structures dotted the ground beneath and around it. The place was bustling with activity, with all the sounds and sights of an actual city. The bridge city itself was one of the largest on Cato Neimoidia, its shadow spanning across the length of the Yuuzhan Vong colony below. It was clear that their meager backpack explosives wouldn't even make a dent in the sprawling compound and city.
"The only thing worse than no intelligence iz bad intelligence," Tesar hissed.
"Goddess?" Tahiri said over their comm. "Are we scrapping the mission?"
There was a pause as Jaina evaluated their situation. *"No."*
"There's no way we can neutralize this entire site, not with the ordinance we have," Colonel Dorja said.
"I'm aware of that. Fortunately, gravity's on our side."
"I don't even want to know what she's thinking," Zindra muttered, closing her eyes. "Those Solos are crazy."
"What's the plan?" Tahiri said with a small grin.
"We're going to make our way up to that hanging city and make things go boom."
Those within the *rakamat*'s coral shelter all turned their gazes upwards at the distant city, and then back down to the ground-based Yuuzhan Vong structures.
"Oh," Tahiri blinked.

"Vale tells me that those cities have a large structural weakness where they're fastened to the rocks. We take out the supports on both sides and we can drop that massive city onto the Yuuzhan Vong below. After, of course, we get the samples Colonel Dorja and the rest of the intel people want."
"You do realize that your plan borders on insanity?"
"Told you," Zindra said with a defeated sigh.
"You've got a better idea?"
"Unfortunately, no," Tahiri shook her head.
"Tahiri, you and Tekli can take your group around to the east end. Tesar and I will take the west."
Tahiri nodded at the Chadra Fan. "Copy."
"The Freed Yuuzhan Vong can procure our ride in the meantime and pick us up when we're ready for extraction."
"This should be good," Judder Page added. "We don't even know what will be waiting for us up there, never mind inside the base."
"Where's your sense of adventure?" Tahiri remarked glibly.
Judder mock glared at her. "Fine. But only because I'm not too old yet to do something this crazy."
"You do have a few grey hairs, sir," Zindra remarked.
Before Judder could remark, the first Yuuzhan Vong patrols from the shaper city approached them. The group quickly ducked back into the coral shelter, hiding out of sight. The distant city quickly became not so distant, and soon their lumbering transports had them within an arm's length of the perimeter walls.
Tahiri glanced apprehensively at the massive rock formation in the center of the Yuuzhan Vong 'city'. "Well, here goes nothing."
The next few minutes passed in tense silence as the 'supply convoy' made its way through the winding roads dotted with Yuuzhan Vong structures and holding pens. Only when the *rakamat* and their four-legged lizard escorts cleared the majority of the shaper city and reach one side of the base of the massive rock foundation, did they relax somewhat.
The two ends of the rocky arch formation that supported the impressive-sized bridge city were both fairly thick themselves. Tunnels had been bored through the many meter thick brown rock and outside walkways spiraled all the way up its length. The tunnels were seldom used by the Neimoidians, as there really was no reason for them to make the long trip to the surface unless it was to hide out or make a land journey to another distant bridge city. The Yuuzhan Vong had also left the tunnels alone, although some of the vegetation they had brought with them had already begun to creep through the dark and

damp passageways. It was a long journey to the top of the arch, a trip no one was really looking forward to.
As the *rakamat*s neared their destination, the strike team covertly piled out and in darted into the nearest tunnel entrance. There they waited with baited breath to see if they had been spotted. When they heard no alarm, they relaxed.
As they started their long trek upwards, Tekli noticed Tahiri's disgruntled expression tilted her head. "What's wrong?"
"Not this again," Tahiri said, scowling at the mossy tunnel walls. Her voice echoed slightly through the windswept passageway.
"Tahiri?"
"These past few years, if I haven't been inside a ship, I'm either crawling around through a jungle full of Yuuzhan Vong, a city full of Yuuzhan Vong, or a cave full of Yuuzhan Vong."
"Why can't we ever be on a beach with Yuuzhan Vong, or in a resort hotel," Zindra agreed.
"The Yuuzhan Vong have casual swimwear?" Judder tilted his head. The act was made all the more comical by the pressurized stormtrooper helmet he was wearing. "Next you're going to tell me they have a synchronized swim-team too."
The entire group shuddered at the image of a circle Yuuzhan Vong in one-piece swimsuits performing intricate water ballet in a giant pool.
"Thanks for taking my mind off the original topic," Tahiri grimaced. "And no, the Yuuzhan Vong don't have casual swimwear or swim-teams. I doubt many of them actually know how to swim."
The group fell quiet as the caves led to an outdoor pathway. The wind was still blowing, buffeting them with every step. The exposure was brief, and soon they were back inside another cave passageway.
"At least we aren't being chased by armies of zealots trying to kill us this time," Zindra pointed out. "It's kind of nice just being able to walk and not run for our lives."
No sooner had the Twin Suns' pilot spoken than an unearthly howl echoed down through the caves. Both Tekli and Tahiri froze in their tracks, the blood draining from their faces.
"I thought we destroyed all the samples on Myrkr," Tekli breathed.
"If the shapers had the DNA stored on a qahsa, they could recreate their work from scratch. It'll take a while, but it's possible," Tahiri whispered almost fearfully.
Another howl.
Zindra shuddered. "Please tell me that's not what I think it is?"
"What?" Judder and Vana and the other commandos with them glanced at the younger members of the group. "What is it?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong most likely know we're here now," Tekli swallowed. "Those howls, they're from voxyn."
Multiple howls, much louder than before, sounded down the passageway.
"Healthy, angry voxyn," Tahiri amended.
The howls grew nearer and the group shifted easily. A sudden movement at the very top of their current path drew their attention. Two shadows paced restlessly, their forms clearly visible.
"Healthy, angry, *very large* voxyn," Zindra managed, drawing her blaster.
"The shapers have definitely been busy," Judder agreed. "If that's a voxyn, I'm an Ewok's uncle."
Through the dim light filtering in from the opposite end of the passage, the group could just make out the details of the large creatures in front of them. Both were only slightly smaller than a kell dragon, and their skin appeared to have the same chitinous, blaster-proof scale-like plating that was often implanted onto other Yuuzhan Vong lifeforms. Razor-sharp fangs glinted in the dim light and their barbed tails swished back and forth.
The strike team slowly began to back up, knowing that close-quarters combat in an enclosed space would be the death of them.
"Jaina," Tahiri said into her comm.
"The voxyn?"
"Oh, you have some too?"
"What cave-crawling adventure wouldn't be complete without them?"
"Their handlers will know that Jedi are on the planet."
"We'll have to go through them as fast as possible then."
Zindra threw up her hands. "Didn't I *just* say that I missed not having to run for my life?"
The two mutated voxyn growled and hissed as they stalked their retreating prey. The group had retreated back out to the open trail, but they now had only a couple of meters between themselves and a very long drop. The voxyn growled, acid dripping from their open mouths. Tahiri and Tekli let their lightsabers fly into their hands.
The use of the Force was enough to aggravate the two creatures and they let out deafening sonic screeches before lunging through the air.
[o-o-[VI]-o-o]
Sannah and Doran moved side-by-side through the dilapidated hallways of the Lorodan planet-side shipyards. Watching their backs were, Yaqeel and Bazel. The hallways were ill-kept, suffering from several years of neglect and Vongforming. The only sources of light

they had were their lightsabers as they meandered through the abandoned structure.
"Do we have any idea where we're going?" Sannah whispered playfully, sneaking in a quick kiss.
"Not like I can stop and ask for directions," Doran whispered back.
"Can you two keep the flirting to a minimum?" Bazel said. "It's hard to stay battle ready with the two of you being so mushy."
In unison, both Sannah and Doran glanced over their shoulder and stuck their tongues out at the Ramoan Jedi.
Yaqeel grinned. "Sannah does have a point, Doran. Aren't we supposed to be under that larger shaper building by now?"
Doran glanced at the small holo-readout of the place's blueprints. "We're nearing one of the processing and assembly areas. It should have a direct route up into the damutek."
As the four advanced they felt a sudden disturbance in the Force. It was cold, dark, hungry, and reeked of bloodlust. And it was coming from somewhere ahead of them.
"Okay," Doran shuddered. "Haven't felt an aura like that since that last Sith temple."
"Story another time," Sannah quipped, her yellow eyes narrowing as she tried to see further down the hallway. "Whatever it is, its calling for us."
"I vote we ignore it completely," Bazel said with mock cheer. "Nothing good ever came from heading towards something that feels so hungry."
Another wave of malevolent Force energy washed over the four. This time from behind them.
"Or we can go on to that assembly area," Yaqeel whispered in a small voice.
"Comms are dead," Doran said, removing his earpiece.
"Of course they are," Sannah muttered, disgruntled.
The dark aura seemed to press through the hallway, forcing the four young Jedi forwards.
"What do you think is doing this?" Yaqeel said, as the four cautiously edged towards the end of the hallway.
"Can't be Vong, they're not Force sensitive," Bazel reasoned.
"It's a group of people," Sannah muttered, her eyes fluttering as she stretched her senses out through the murky darkness. "But the currents, they're all wrong. It's like the people aren't supposed to be in the Force but are."
"So it could be the Vong again," Barv groaned.

The four emerged into a cavernous room that stretched several stories upwards. Deactivated conveyor belts, rusted walkways, and mechanical arms of all sorts stuck out at every angle. The roof of the room had been sheered away, and there was no mistaking the yorik coral surface that had taken its place.
Nor was there any mistaking the three figures standing on one of the walkways overlooking the assembly floor. Their black, almost carapace-like skin allowed them to almost disappeared into the shadows of the darkened room, but their red and yellow eyes glowed malevolently in the shine of the young teens' lightsabers.
Two more figures emerged from behind the Jedi, standing in the exit motionlessly.
"Errr…hi?" Doran tried.
"They have lightsabers!" Yaqeel gasped in shock, recognizing the cylindrical yorik-coral fixture attached to the nearest dark-skinned creature's belt.
"Shaped Jedi," Sannah breathed, recognizing the creatures and what she was feeling in the Force. Reflexively, she slid so that she stood protectively in front of Doran, her lightsaber held at the ready.
"At least they finally got the formula right," Doran muttered.
"Can you admire the shapers' handy work later?" Bazel grunted. "These things are probably going to try and kill us."
"You know, there are only four of us and five of them," Yaqeel said nervously.
"Sannah and I will take on three, you and Bazel get the other two," Doran said in turn.
The Slayers standing on the upper catwalk dropped down in one fluid move. In unison, the five Slayers held out a hand and their yorik-coral lightsaber flew into it. Their other hand loosened their abnormally-shaped amphistaffs, which closely resembled bullwhips. The lightsabers activated, casting a purple pall in the abandoned factory floor. Their amphistaffs slowly uncoiled until they dragged on the ground beside their masters.
The young Jedi tensed, standing back to back as they eyed their opponents.
Seconds stretched into minutes as the two sides stared each other down.
The faintest twitch of a muscle.
And the two sides flung themselves at each other in an explosion of motion.
[o-o-[VII]-o-o]

"Go, we'll cover you!" Tahiri barked at the other commandos as she waved her lightsaber to ward off the mutated voxyn stalking her.
"Ascension cables, now," Judder barked out.
The group fired pitons into a rocky outcropping above them and let the automatic retractors pull them up. In the meantime, both Tekli and Tahiri dove to the side as the giant voxyn leaped at them once more. The barbed tails flicked out, but both Jedi batted them aside and moved back to back.
The mutated voxyn were proving to be extremely agile and intelligent beasts. At one point, when Tahiri and Tekli had baited one of them off the edge, they were surprised to see it claw its way back up the rocky façade and rejoin the fight only seconds later. Since then, both voxyn had avoided the edge and appeared content to keep the two Jedi herded.
"Just like old times, huh?" Tahiri remarked, sweat stinging her eyes as she struggled to catch her breath.
"At least neither of us have to worry about Anakin," Tekli remarked.
"Yeah. We just have to worry about becoming voxyn chew-toys!" Tahiri whirled aside as her voxyn charged, while Tekli used the Force to leap over her own opponent. The voxyn spun around and spat acid, which sizzled when it hit the brown boulders that made up the path's wall.
Guttural Yuuzhan Vong calls could be heard from somewhere over the path's ledge and Tahiri hazarded a glance down. At the very bottom, a stream of Yuuzhan Vong warriors were pouring into the cave-like passageways carved into the rock formation.
"We're going to have more company soon."
"Ideas?" Tekli breathed. She wasn't a fighter, and drawn out combat definitely put her at a disadvantage.
"One," Tahiri's expression hardened slightly. "And it's either that or we stick around."
Tekli glanced at Tahiri once more. The blond Jedi's green eyes had become chlorine ice and there was a definite change in her Force presence. "Tahiri?"
The two voxyn continued to growl and snarl, keeping the Jedi from retreating or advancing with their massive bodies.
Rather than answer, Tahiri held out one hand towards the voxyn blocking their path. After only a second, it appeared to gag, emitting a whimpering sound as it did. The other voxyn hissed in anger and charged, but Tahiri promptly whirled around and created a powerful wall of Force energy. The large creature slammed into it with the force of a speeding train, the snap of its bones audible. In the meantime the first voxyn recovered and tried to attack Tahiri again.

This time, however, Tahiri held out her hand and suddenly closed her fist. The voxyn staggered to a halt and then collapsed, blood trickling out of its nose and mouth. The second voxyn weakly tried to get to its feet, but Tahiri repeated the gesture and soon both were lying lifeless on either side of the Jedi.
"Tahiri," Tekli whispered, registering nothing but shock.
"Come on," Tahiri said firmly, though she looked a bit pale. The shouts of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors echoing upwards. "We need to get going."
"But you just…those voxyn…the Force."
"We didn't have time to kill them with lightsabers or amphistaff," Tahiri said briefly as they began to jog up the path. "And don't worry, there's no way I'll be doing that again. That just felt all sorts of wrong."
"Are *you* okay?" Tekli said, her inner-healer getting the better of her.
Tahiri released a breath, calling on her bond with Jaina to expel the last of the ill-affects she was still feeling. She could feel Jaina's concern, and did her best to send positive thoughts back over to the older Jedi.
"Yeah. I think I'll leave that line-walking to Anakin and Alema from now on."
"Line walking?"
"Balancing between the dark and light," Tahiri clarified as they continued their ascent. "I think I'm more inclined to slip to the dark because I have the fears and anger of two people in me."
"Riina and the old Tahiri?"
"Right," Tahiri breathed, glancing back over her shoulder. "It's twice the battle, and I know it's one I'll definitely lose. It's just too tempting to immerse myself in that power."
"Well if you start going dark, I'll let you know. That was kind of scary," Tekli said.
"Thanks, I'd appreciate it," Tahiri nodded fervently. The darkness that she had felt on Dagobah had resurfaced and was coursing throughout her body like a toxin despite her efforts to cleanse it. It didn't take a Force sage to know that if she kept on using that darker part of her, she'd eventually reach a point of no return.
A loud screech filled the air, interrupting her musing. A niggling in the Force, and both Jedi dropped to the ground seconds before a large reptile-like bird swooped in and nearly cleaved their heads off with wicked looking metal talons.
"Another Yuuzhan Vong creation?" Tekli said in exasperation, watching the creature bank for a second pass.
There was a scream of terror and both Jedi looked up to see one of the commandos who had gone on ahead flail in a frightening free-fall.

With great effort, both Tahiri and Tekli snagged the man out of the air with the Force, only for the reptile-bird creature to swoop in and swallow the man whole. Two more reptile-birds came into view and both Tekli and Tahiri exchanged exasperated expressions as they dived for cover.
"What did we do, stumble upon a shaper zoo?" Tekli said. They ducked back into the enclosed cave pathway, but the shelter provided no reprieve. Two more large voxyn were awaiting them, as well as a small pack of fanged, Ewok-sized, rodent-like creatures.
"Yes? Think of the bright side though," Tahiri breathed, her saber flashing and slicing apart one of the larger rodents. It exploded the moment her saber touched it and a noxious fume surrounded the blond teen. Tekli quickly held out her hand and used the Force to neutralize whatever the cloud of vapor contained.
"Bright side, what bright side? We're surrounded by creatures that want to claw us apart, poison us, and eat us!" Tekli Force shoved another rodent into the snarling mouth of one of the large voxyn, choking the creation. The Chadra Fan then hurled her lightsaber down the voxyn's throat after the rodent, and the smaller animal exploded like its counterpart. This time, however, the entire head of the voxyn seemed to dissolve as the fumes broke down flesh, muscle, and bone in a matter of seconds.
"I don't know! When we're in the situation we're in, aren't we supposed to be looking for a bright side of things?"
"The only bright side I care about is the other end of this cave!" Tekli yelped as bat-like creatures swarmed down from somewhere up ahead. Their echo-location seemed to be both a sensory method and a sonic attack as high pitch frequencies bombarded the Chadra Fan's ears.
"We'll get there. Petting zoo first!" Tahiri created another wall of Force energy, and the bat swarm collided into it and dropped down on top of the exploding rodents.
"Petting zoo!" Tekli leaped over the remaining voxyn and then rolled away from its slashing tail. "You really have to stop hanging around the Solos. You're picking up their sense of humor!"
The sound of blaster fire rang out, drawing closer.
"I don't think I've ever been so happy to hear blaster fire in my life," Tekli exhaled, her body being pushed to its limits as she dodged, leaped, rolled, and otherwise just tried to stay alive amidst the menagerie of Yuuzhan Vong shaped-creatures.
"That makes two of us!" The blaster fire had reached them and was mowing down the alien life-forms at a rapid rate.

"Come on!" Judder Page yelled down. "There's a second pack of animals moving at us from above!"
Tahiri and Tekli sprinted through the twitching corpses, sweat beading down their faces. "What's the status?"
"We lost three people so far," Judder and several commandos focused their blasterfire at the seemingly unstoppable voxyn. "But it's nothing we can't handle."
Both Jedi whirled around in unison, their lightsabers flaring back to life and bisecting the voxyn in mid-leap.
The guns fell silent and the group staggered back out into the sunlight.
"You two are a mess," Judder remarked.
Tekli and Tahiri blinked. They were both covered in blood, soot, burns, cuts, and all manner of minor ailments. Their armored jumpsuits hadn't fared much better, sliced apart in multiple areas over the brief battle with the shaped creatures.
"I just thought of a bright side," Tekli said faintly, discarding a burnt out case of bandages.
"Yeah?"
"We're still alive."
"There's that."
"We still have another kilometer and a half to ascend," Judder pointed upwards. "And then we have to figure out some way to release the fasteners holding the city in place. A lot can happen in that time."
"Thanks Old Man Negatude," Tahiri said sarcastically.
"Who's the 'old man'?" Judder sputtered.
A blast bug fired upwards from one of the warriors below them exploded off to the side.
"Insults later, more running now!" Tekli shouted.
Tahiri, Judder, and the commandos who had come back for them took off once more.

[o-o-[VIII]-o-o]

Lightsaber met lightsaber in a blur of purple and blue as Sannah and Doran held off the three Slayers in a breakneck battle of wits and will. All the more challenging was the fact that the Slayer were also utilizing their whip-amphistaffs, keeping the two Jedi from going on the offensive. The only possible saving grace was that the Slayers, and their intentions, could be read in the Force. Of course, the reverse was also true and Doran and Sannah's movements were predicted just as easily.
Both teens were breathing heavily as they stood back to back. Sweat drenched their tunics and their eyes quickly tracked the three Slayers circling them.

"Got a plan, Adventure Boy?" Sannah breathed heavily. In the distance, Yaqeel was dancing in and out of a set of conveyor belts, avoiding the dual-weaponed approached of her opponent. Bazel was likewise tied up, literally, trying to bat aside the cables and downed wiring his Slayer was wrapping him up in.
"You're not going to like it."
"Better unhappy than dead."
"Don't say I didn't warn you," Doran said, smirking slightly.
Doran pushed off from her and recklessly charged the Slayer immediately in front of him. The Force sensitive warrior, startled by the sudden attack, lashed out with his amphistaff and snared Doran's lightsaber blade in an explosive display of crackling and hissing. With his lightsaber tied up, Doran appeared defenseless as the Slayer raised his lightsaber for a killing blow.
"Doran!"
Rather than be impaled by the approaching blade, however, Doran intercepted it with his bare hand and halted its progress. The glowing purple blade seemed to enter his hand, but not leave it. At the same time, Doran deactivated and reactivated his lightsaber in quick succession. The whip fell away when the saber was shut off, freeing the weapon, and in a single sweep Doran decapitated the stunned Slayer.
Sannah blinked, the entire flurry of movement had lasted less than two seconds. Doran shook his hand and glanced at the small circular burn on his palm ruefully. "Thought I had that technique ready. Guess I need more practice."
"Practice blocking a lightsaber with your bare hand?" Sannah blurted incredulously.
"Get down!" Doran tackled her out of the way as the remaining two Slayers lunged for her. They missed by micrometers, amphistaff and yorik-coral saber taking chunks out of Sannah and Doran's Mandalorian plating and the armored jumpsuits they wore beneath. "Battle's not over yet, Fish-Girl." Doran breathed from atop her.
He quickly flipped them around and literally launched her at the Slayer who had decided to charge them. Sannah was a blur of motion as she contorted her body in mid-air and swept her saber downwards. Her weapons flashed against the first Slayer, before being brought around and slicing off the hands of the second.
With the two Slayers temporarily focused on her, Doran used the Force to enhance his speed. Another gesture sent both Slayers toppling into each other before they both ended up being and impaled together by

his lightsaber. Doran retracted the blade and proceeded to add two more headless Slayer bodies to the ground.
Looking back around, Doran and Sannah could see Yaqeel shove her own opponent into an industrial-sized shredder, while Bazel had managed to bring down several larger machines from the upper floor onto his own opponent. The racket for both was ear-splitting, but it was clear that the other two young Knights had survived their engagement as well.
"That was fun," Bazel said sarcastically, nursing a lightsaber burned side. "Let's not do that ever again."
"Seconded," a weary Yaqeel nodded. "Can we go get the virus samples and go home now?"
"Seven floors up," Doran gestured.
"And straight through that Yuuzhan Vong building probably full of warriors and shapers," Sannah finished.
"What were those things anyway?" Bazel knelt by one of the Slayers Doran had dispatched. "They're not Vong, but they're not really human either."
Sannah knelt down on the opposite side and held out both hands, closing her eyes. Bazel tilted his head. "Sannah?"
"Shhh…I'm trying to answer your question," Sannah muttered.
"It's a trick Master Jusik of the Mandos taught us," Doran explained in a low voice. "We can read the Force signature of the object we're sensing to discover its origins. The Force preserves the last feelings or memories surrounding an object if you know how to look."
"Even bodies?"
"According to Master Jusik, yes," Doran nodded. "But he only had us look at objects. He wasn't exactly clear why."
The three younger Jedi gathered around Sannah as she delved into the Force to analyze the body before her. After only a few seconds, her yellow eyes flew open in shock and a hand flew up to cover her mouth. "Oh!"
"Sannah?" Yaqeel said hesitantly as tears formed in the young Melodie's eyes.
"That isn't right," Sannah mumbled, numbly reaching out with one of her hands for Doran. "Not right at all."
Doran pulled her up into a small hug, rubbing her back comfortingly. She gripped him back in a tighter embrace, her legs trembling. "What did you see, Fish-Girl?"
Sannah just shook her head, her breathing ragged as she fought against a small swell of conflicting emotions. She just clung to Doran,

her entire body shivering as she used their Force bond to stabilize herself.
Bazel and Yaqeel both glanced back at the body uncertainly, wondering what had upset their Melodie friend so much.
Finally, Sannah managed to take a deep breath. "Those…things. You know that a lot of Jedi died in this war, right? Their bodies never recovered..."
The three others shifted uneasily.
"The cells that make up the bodies of those things…they're from all the Jedi that died facing the Yuuzhan Vong. The one I sensed…there are bits and pieces of the Jedi who died at Myrkr and elsewhere. All their deaths…I know why Master Jusik didn't have us analyze bodies now…" Sannah trailed off, still gripping Doran tightly.
"You mean…" Bazel looked sick. "That those things we just fought, they're bits and pieces of the bodies of other Jedi?"
"On a cellular level," Sannah nodded against Doran's chest. She was able to respond solely because of the strength Doran was lending her. "It's likely the shapers cloned the tissue repeatedly to make some sort of basic imprint. At least that's my guess based on what Jedi Knight Tekli and Master Cilghal taught me during those lessons on Mon Cal."
"Doran, take Sannah to the evac point," Yaqeel said, looking pointedly at the traumatized Melodie. "Bazel and I can get the samples of the viruses."
"Are you sure?"
"Yeah," Yaqeel said. "You just make sure we have a ride out of here. We'll see you on the roof of the building."
"Good luck and may the Force be with you."
"You too," Bazel gave a brief salute. He and Yaqeel then used the Force to jump to the upper levels of the assembly room.
Doran, in the meantime, gently swept Sannah off of her feet and effortlessly held her to him. "Come on, Fish-Girl," He placed caring kiss on her forehead as she looped her arms around his neck. "Let's go home."
[o-o-[IX]-o-o]
"What do you think the others are doing?" Zekk glanced over to Ganner. The both of them were reclined on one of the many rooftops of Crullov city.
"They're smart people, so they're probably relaxing, like us," Ganner said lightly, piece of straw in his mouth as he stared up at the starry night's sky. The rain had finally let up, and with most of the city light's off out of respect to the Yuuzhan Vong, the view of the galaxy was truly breathtaking. "They'd have to be completely out of their minds to

sign up on some crazy, half-planned mission so close to the final battle."
Zekk folded his hands behind his head. "You're right. They're probably having the time of their lives while we're stuck here plotting to overthrow yet another government."
"We're getting way too good at that."
"'We're' getting?"
"Fine, *I'm* getting way too good at this, happy?"
"The historians are going to have a field day writing your biography," Zekk chuckled. "I mean, since Hapes, the stories about you have just been crazy."
"Yeah," Ganner let out an amused breath. "'Ganner Rhysode, once had a staring contest with a star and it blinked first.'"
"Or 'Ganner Rhysode, freed a hundred thousand slaves and prisons just for the fun of it.' You're a legend, in a class all of your own."
Ganner turned his head to smile wryly at Zekk. "Hey, I'm like Anakin. I don't go looking for fame and fortune, it finds me."
"Let's hope that fortune holds up for tomorrow's…errr…I guess it would be 'today's' coup, by now."
"Will you relax already? We're only disposing a puppet government, smuggling ourselves onto a Yuuzhan Vong command cruiser and using it to wipe out the rest of the Vong garrison in orbit after we apprehend that Intendant in charge of everything. It's not like we're facing armies of Vong on a hostile planet, or facing down their Warmaster and their entire fleet."
"After this war, one thing's for sure," Zekk laughed. "We're never going to have to worry about doing any of that ever again."
"Using my great powers of prediction, I foresee one galaxy united, one intergalactic war stopped, and lots of little babies being born as every celebrates life," Ganner said with mock solemn-ness.
"Don't forget everlasting peace and happiness for all," Zekk smiled.
"That too. Thought it was implied with all that baby-making," Ganner smirked.
"What are your plans after the war is over? Are you going to stay with the Empire?"
"Nah," Ganner shook his head. "I think I'll write my own book about my exploits. Cash in on my fame as Ganner Rhysode the Jedi Knight and liberator of planets. You know, actually do something to give those Solos a break. I'm the Jedi Order's media representative, unofficially of course, but I might as well take advantage of that. I'll be in the media so much you guys will get sick of looking at this handsome face of mine. How about you?"

"Me? I think I'll just go to wherever the Jedi Order needs me," Zekk shrugged. "Fighting pirates, escorting diplomats, settling feuds. The usual Jedi business."
"At the very least we should all get that happily ever after," Ganner said, looking pensive. "We definitely deserve one. Otherwise, what would have been the point of all this fighting if the only thing we had to look forward to was more fighting and death?"
"You're a lot more optimistic than I am," Zekk replied, sounding tired. "If history has taught us anything it's that happily-ever-afters are for holovids and not real life. We're fortunate that the Force has been with us and allowed most of our friends to make it through this war so far."
"Yeah, fortunate," Ganner exhaled. In the far distance, explosions and swooping coralskippers was evident of yet another hit-and-run attack by the Corulag rebels. The attacks had been nonstop since they had gained access to the resources of the crime families, wearing away at the puppet government and the Yuuzhan Vong garrison little by little.
"This galaxy is definitely going to need the Jedi to pull it back together after the mess this war has left behind. I mean, just take this single city, on a single planet, in a small part of the galaxy. I definitely don't envy Rahm and Mallie if this is all they have to work with," Zekk gestured at the darkened ruinscape around them that had once been Corulag's second largest city.
"Then again, we're the ones who will be fixing up the *rest* of the galaxy," Ganner said. "I'd feel more sorry for us."
Zekk stared up at the distant stars. "A Jedi's duty is never over, but it's an ironic duty. The Jedi need disorder to have a purpose, to be useful to this galaxy. We need a dark to our light, conflict to our peace. Our code is one of opposites, a denial of the darkness we have to face. As bad as the dark side is, it's times like this when I wonder if the light side isn't missing something too. There might not be any ignorance, but we don't have all the knowledge either."
"Interesting thing for you to say, considering well, you know, your brief fetish for black clothing, breath play, electrocution, and red lightsabers."
"I think it's because of my time at the Shadow Academy that I can understand some of what Anakin is saying," Zekk closed his eyes and just stretched his senses out across the planet. "There's the Force that we were taught, that the Jedi of old were taught, and there's the reality of it. There's no doubt that a dark side and a light side exists, but it's how we think of those concepts that create the gray area Anakin is walking in."

"*I* think you philosophical types make the Force a lot harder and confusing than it should be," Ganner said lightly. "The Force just *is*, end of story. Light side, dark side, gray side, upside, downside, front side, back side. In the end the Jedi are just like any other person in this galaxy. We live and die only once; and like any senator or soldier, with the power and position we have, we have the choice to help others, hurt others, or stand aside and let the galaxy do its own thing. It's our actions that will be remembered by future generations, not what we think about this mystical power we seemed to have inherited. The media sure doesn't care about Anakin's Force philosophies, only the most recent things he's done. They don't care that I'm not considered the ideal Jedi by the other *real* Jedi. I carry a lightsaber, liberate planets, and look good while doing it, and that's all that matters to them."
In the distance, the sun began to rise, slowly chasing away the darkness of the night.
"Well then," Zekk got to his feet and conceded the point. "If it's the only thing that matters in the long run, let's see if we can't liberate this planet and look good while doing it."
"That's the spirit," Ganner laughed, standing as well. He clapped a hand on Zekk's shoulder. "Come, fame and fortunate await us. Well, that and an entire planet eager to say goodbye to the Vong."
"Led the way, fearless leader."
"That's Anakin's title."
"What's yours?"
"I'm Ganner Rhysode, I need no other introduction."
Zekk rolled his eyes and smiled. "Let's just go liberate this planet."
[o-o-[Chapter End]-o-o]
A\N: So begins the start of the end of the final chapter of the first part of this duology =). Seven chapters and an epilogue left to go, with the final battle and its set up taking four, this Cato Neimoidia/Lorodan arc taking two more, and a mini-adventure in between.
Next chapters, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday...

ADA 62

Sixty-Two
[o-o-[I]-o-o]
The coup was quick and decisive.
After planting rumors of impending attacks all throughout the capital, stretching out the puppet government's security forces, Galen Marek and the Corulag rebels launched an all-out assault on the capital

building itself. As this was happening, the Jedi were aboard one of Corulag's criminal syndicates' slaving vessels, ready to take on the more immediate threat in orbit. Said vessel was currently stopped for inspection by a Yuuzhan Vong patrol craft, ensuring that nothing that went against the Yun'o and Shimrra—such as droids or starship parts—was being smuggled off planet.

The scowling Yuuzhan Vong picketship commander stormed his way through the vessel, barking orders to his men as they searched the ship room to room. Finally, the only place left for them to check was the massive cargo hold at the back of the ship.

The eight-strong group of warriors entered the room, eyes suspiciously darting to every cargo crate, every shadow.

"What's in these crates?" The commander growled.

"Food goods," stand-in captain, a teenage-looking Falleen replied. Apparently Falleen pheromones worked even on Yuuzhan Vong as the warrior nodded amicably.

"Is that so?"

"I wouldn't dare lie to you," the captain swallowed, looking fearful. Most Yuuzhan Vong warriors prided themselves on the fear they caused in the enemies, and the commander was no different. He grinned at the Falleen. "If you have, you will die a slow torturous death."

The Falleen quickly backed up several steps, holding out her hands pleadingly as she stood on the opposite side of the door well. "No! I promise, I wouldn't!"

"We shall see." The commanding warrior made a gesture to his subordinates, and they began tearing into the cargo boxes with glee. As if needing to support herself, the Falleen captain rested a hand by the frame of the door. Several seconds of searching later, and one of the warriors crowed victoriously as he found the head of a translator droid buried in one of the crates. As the commander turned around to sneer at her, Natua simply rolled her eyes, hit the door panel, and vented the entire bay—Vong warriors and all—into space. She then reached up and tapped her comlink.

"Objective complete."

"Roger that Green Girl. We've completed our objectives too, the picketship is ours. Come on over and join us."

"Ganner Rhysode the pirate now, huh?" Natua said, waving goodbye to the crime-syndicate-supplied crew as she strode back through the ship. "Will your legend never stop growing?"

"I hope not. I'll be one of those guys who'll live forever," Ganner said brightly. *"Who knows, maybe in a hundred years from now there'll be people naming their kids after me."*
She stepped through the organic docking cowl and tilted her head at Mallie, Rahm, and Zekk. "So, the four of us against an entire Yuuzhan Vong garrison?"
"The four of us and the seven Shamed Ones this ship had," Ganner jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the people now piloting the vessel.
"And the five other warriors who decided that continued living was better than an end by lightsaber," Rahm gestured to the bulkier and scarred Yuuzhan Vong currently dragging the bodies of their comrades into a small pile in the back of the bridge.
"Gotta give Anakin and Tahiri credit, they really do know how to turn the war on its head," Ganner chuckled.
Natua glanced at their new crew. "Out of curiosity, do any of them understand Basic?"
Ganner blinked.
Zekk seemed embarrassed.
Rahm sheepishly scratched his head.
Mallie held her face in one hand and shook her head. "They've been gesturing like crazy idiots to get their points across. I think Ganner managed to convince the warriors that he was a new god, or something like that."
Natua stared at Ganner patiently.
The man had the graces to look embarrassed. "It was the only way the warriors would follow me without taking their own lives. They had to still adhere to the Yun'o, but as far as I know there wasn't any 'Rhysode' god."
"So you created one?"
"Yup, Yun-Rhysode. Is that a problem?"
"In many, many, many ways," Natua said blandly.
"In my defense, Zekk's starship noise and imitation was much more embarrassing. It was like he was trying to feed a baby by playing 'here's comes the starship' with those fully grown warriors."
Zekk blushed and glowered at Ganner. "I was trying to get them to pilot the vessel to the Yuuzhan Vong command-ship. You didn't seem to be having much luck getting your point across, and you crashed the last Vong vessel we were on."
"That was two years ago!"
Natua shook her head and looked to Rahm and Mallie as Ganner and Zekk argued playfully. "You see why it was a bad idea for me to be

separated from the two of them for any prolonged period of time? Those two need constant supervision."
Mallie and Rahm nodded mournfully. "We know better now."
The living ship disengaged from the metal vessel, and as the metal vessel streaked off into hyperspace with its cargo, the living ship began to head towards the Yuuzhan Vong command vessel in orbit.
"Phase one of the plan went well," Ganner clapped his hands together. "Now all we have to do is ring up that Vong in charge of everything…"
"Commander Oz'galathsha Shen'g." Natua reminded him.
"Yes, that guy. And say we have a defenseless Jedi we would like to present him, and when he comes down to do his bad guy gloating, we either take him prisoner or take him out. We then make our way to the bridge, cause chaos, and somehow escape back down to the planet as the Yuuzhan Vong ships blow each other up."
"We're lucky there are only four ships in orbit and that we're in one of them. Otherwise this would have been really hard to do," Rahm said deadpan.
The Yuuzhan Vong warriors seemed to talk with themselves, with a lot of furtive glances in Ganner's direction. One of the Shamed One pilots smirked and shook his head, but still concentrated on his task at hand.
"What do you think they're saying?" Mallie said softly.
"Probably discussing what type of god Rhysode is," Zekk said dryly.
"That is one way to put it," the Shamed One pilot said in fairly accented Basic. "They believe that, if your *Jeedai* friend is a god, then the Rhysode is the god of swollen egos, madness and insanity. And they were wondering if Yun-Yammka would take them back after they were 'touched by Rhysode'."
Ganner blinked wildly as the other Jedi laughed.
"So you mean to tell me that Rhysode has become another word for madness?" Zekk managed to gasp, shaking his head in amusement.
The pilot inclined his head. "It has been for quite some time. If even half the stories the Yuuzhan Vong have heard about him are true, it is madness to think that only one person could do so much and still be alive."
Ganner managed a weak smile. "At least I'm still a god."
"A subordinate to Yun-Harla," the pilot nodded.
"Like a certain dark god to Yun-Yammka?" Ganner said, recalling the Yun-Lingni worshiping Domain Vorrik from the Remnant.
The pilot blanched, but nodded. "Yes, and thank you for not mentioning the god-that-must-not-be-named."
Appearing pensive for a moment, Ganner nodded. "I think I can live with that. Jaina was always the better deity and leader anyways."

"And his ego has recovered," Natua muttered under her breath.
"Wait a moment, if you could speak Basic, why didn't you say anything earlier?" Mallie said, looking at the Shamed One in confusion.
The pilot tilted his head with a grin. "And miss the chance to see the all-powerful *Jeedai* acting like completely senile idiots?"
"You're from a Yun-Harla sect, aren't you," Zekk sighed. "They're the only ones with a sense of humor."
"Before I was Shamed," the pilot nodded.
"Can we just call Oz Shen'g and get this mission over with?" Mallie groaned. "I wanna go home, have a warm meal, and not deal with anymore out-of-planet peoples for a very long time. Yuuzhan Vong *and* Jedi."
The pilot nodded and gestured to one of the warriors. The warrior approached, looking dubiously at Ganner, before entering into a short conversation with the Shamed One. After some yelling and disbelieving shakes of his head, the warrior appeared to relent. With slumped shoulders, he walked over to the villip cluster and, after one last long look at Ganner, activated it. As he spoke to the scarred Yuuzhan Vong that answered, the pilot provided a translation for the others. "This is the sub-commander of the *Path of Golden Coral,* hailing command ship."
"We are receiving you."
"On a routine interdiction mission, the gods were kind enough to grant us a boon. A way for all of us loyal servants to Shimrra to leave this forsaken planet and join our brethren on the front lines. I have news for Commander Shen'g, something so important that only he should be allowed to hear it."
After the usual blustering and threats to ensure that the news was worthy of their commander's time, the warrior's message was sent up the chain of command, which mercifully consisted of only three others, before he was finally transferred to Commander Shen'g himself. *"What is it?"*
"Commander, we have captured a *Jeedai* trying to flee the planet!"
"Truly?" It didn't take a genius to see that Commander Shen'g was intrigued, even though it was through the fair imitation of his likeness over the villip.
"Yes, the *Jeedai* was formidable, killing most of my warriors before we were able to subdue him. Captain Eklut is currently guarding him as we speak. He claims his name is Ganner Rhysode."
"The Ganner Rhysode? The infidel Jeedai who destroyed our force on Myrkr, Hapes, Palanhi, Borleias, and in the Empire? The one the heretical Shamed foolishly call a god?"

The warrior briefly glanced at Ganner, seeing the man swell with obvious pride that even this enemy commander in the middle of nowhere knew his name. In a flat tone, the warrior nodded. "Yes, *that* Ganner Rhysode."
"*Very well. You are to bring this Ganner to me and I will personally handle his transfer to Yuuzhan'tar. Captain Eklut has done well. Inform him that once I have been granted leave to join the rest of the loyal followers of Shimrra on the front lines, he will be granted my position as ruler of this system."*
"I obey, great one."
The villip reverted, and the warrior glanced at Ganner once more, a look of sheer disbelief on his face. It was as if he was unable to believe that the first part of the plan had worked. The warrior seemed torn between backing away fearfully and getting on his knees and bowing low.
"Yes," Ganner grinned at the warrior. "I'm *that* Ganner Rhysode."
"Ganner the fool," Natua said in a dry voice, patting Ganner's arm sympathetically.
"Ganner the deluded," Zekk nodded, added another patronizing pat.
"Ganner the insane," Rahm deadpanned from where he was.
"Ganner who's so glad he has all these great friends," Ganner said, mock scowling at the younger Jedi.
"Yes," Mallie sighed. "*That* Ganner. Now let's hope this absurd plan of his works."
[o-o-[II]-o-o]
"Doran, wait," Sannah muttered, lightly tugging on his arm and then pointing off to the side. They had been staying low, stealthily making their way through the burning shaper compound en route to the evac point.
"Sannah?"
"Look."
Doran turned his head in the direction she was indicating. She was pointing to the open-air holding pens that held the multitude of prisoners that the shapers would soon use for experimentation. There were soldiers, mechanics, but also children and families all looking despondent as the base was razed around them. The lack of attention to their pens had caused them to understand that the attack wasn't for the purposes of freeing them and that they still had a fate worse than death ahead of them.
"Sannah," Doran said slowly.
"We're Jedi. We're supposed to be saving people," Sannah said, a resolute gleam in her eyes. "What's the point of us wrecking this base

if all we're going to do is save a few virus samples and kill a bunch of Vong?"
Doran exhaled, running a hand through his hair. "Fine. But we're going to need a bigger dropship. There has to be hundreds of people in that pen alone. We can't save them all."
"We won't know until we try," Sannah said, her yellow eyes scanning the base. Firefights and yells could still be heard at different junctures, mingled with the occasional flare of a jetpack and explosion of a missile.
"There," Doran pointed to a dilapidated vehicle hanger off to the side of the runway. Most of the building was overgrown with Yuuzhan Vong plant-life, and the metal walls looked corroded and paper thin. The doors to the building were wide open and hanging on their hinges, allowing the young Jedi to see the vehicle inside.
It was a massive, wheeled, people-mover, meant to transport the shipyard's population back to their dormitories spread throughout the planet's surface after the day's work was complete. It also functioned as a tug and hauler during the day hours, moving small ships and large engine pieces to and fro. Easily the size of a small house, with sixteen wheels all twice as tall as Doran's own towering form, the only thing the vehicle didn't have was weapons, armor, and the ability to fly off the planet.
"That's a start," Sannah nodded. "Let's hope it's still functional."
"Let's find out." Deviating from their intended course to the evac site, the two made their way across a bombed out runway that stretched out across the land for nearly a kilometer. All around them were the reminders of what the shipyard had once been in its prime. They could still hear distant gunbattles being waged and an occasional Yuuzhan Vong war cry and knew that they had to hurry. Their section of the shaper base would only remain unoccupied for so long.
The young Jedi carefully entered through the rusted doors and surveyed the behemoth of a bus in front of them.
"It's bigger than I thought," Doran whistled, craning his head back. The back of the hangar had caved in, but it appeared as if the vehicle was still in one piece. How long it would stay that way was another story. "If we take this we're going to be a giant target."
"The hard part will be getting those hundreds of slaves from the pens to here without being blown up by the Vong in orbit," Sannah said.
"Are you kidding?" Doran laughed, he hit a button and the back of the mega-bus dropped down, revealing that the vehicle had three levels within. It was almost like a miniature sandcrawler. "That's the easy part. The hard part will be getting this beast out of the base and

somehow locating a place big enough to hide it. It's large, but it's no tank. A direct plasma hit will blow it to pieces."
"You sound oddly happy about that," Sannah chirped as they located the cockpit of the mega-bus.
"It'll make us be that much more careful about not getting hit by super-heated globs of rock," Doran replied. They sat in the pilot and co-pilot seat and looked at the control console. It looked simple enough, and the last driver had even left the keys in the ignition.
"Here's the manual," Sannah pulled out a datapad from the underside of her seat and skimmed through it. "Okay, this thing has a fusion reactor so it should still have juice. Hey, it has a skylight, astral! Hmm…the maximum speed…let's see."
"Well, the dial on the dashboard only goes up to fifty kph, so not that fast," Doran said, tapping on the display console. "But it does look like we have power."
"How do you want to do it, drive it over here or lead the prisoners here?"
"Lead them here," Doran said. "Like I said earlier, the moment this thing starts moving it's going to be a giant target."
The two Jedi exited the vehicle and paused as they heard the familiar roar of two jetpacks. Landing in front of the hangar only moments later were Jintar and Dinua. They had set their Basilisks on auto, and even now the explosions from the havoc the droids were causing continued to boom in the background.
"Su'cuy you two," Dinua called out. "The boss in the watchtower wondered what the two of you were doing. The evac zone is on the other side of the base."
Almost on cue, the other teams began to report in via comlink.
"*Team One here, Barv and I have got the virus samples and set the charges. We're heading to the evac point now."*
"*This is Valin of Team Three. We're done here too, be at the evac point in five."*
"*Team Five here, our job's complete."*
"We're not quite done with our mission," Doran said with a weak smile.
"Aren't you part of Team One with your other Jedi friends?" Jintar tilted his head.
"We're going to rescue those people in the holding pens," Sannah gestured to the organic fences on the opposite side of the runway.
"Because it's the Jedi thing to do?" Dinua said.
"Because it's the right thing to do," Sannah held Dinua's helmeted gaze.

"Whatever we do, we need to do it quick or we'll get left behind," Jintar said.
"Right, you two can come with us," Doran gestured as he and Sannah began a light jog back outside. "We're piling them all into the mega-bus behind us."
"And what? Drive off the planet?"
"We're still working on that part," Doran shrugged sheepishly.
"You are one *ori'dikut!"* Dinua groaned, shaking her head. "And since I'm still kind of fond of you, I guess I have no choice but to help you out in this insane plan of yours."
"Really," Jintar agreed. "And your people called us Mandos crazy."
The quartet ran the rest of the way across the soot-covered ground. They were fortunate that the warriors who had been guarding the pens had been some of the first to be killed when they rushed to respond to arrival of the drop-pods. The pens were completely unguarded.
"Listen up," Doran called out to the hopeful crowd on the other side of the organic fence. He used the Force to impress upon them the seriousness of the situation. "Once we open the gate, you'll be coming with us to the vehicle hangar across the way. There's a mega-bus there that should fit all of you, but we're going to need do this in a quick and organized fashion."
"Please keep any panicking, chaotic dashes for freedom, or grateful hysteria until after we've left the planet," Sannah said with a friendly smile. This caused some of the crowd to chuckle ruefully.
"Okay, stand back." Doran and Sannah's lightsabers made quick work of the living fence, cleaving through the coral and vines and creating several good-sized doors. Dinua and Jintar took point, handing their side-arms to a couple of former soldiers, and leading the group in a brisk jog back to the vehicle hangar.
As Doran and Sannah opened up another pen, Corran's incredulous voice came over the comm. *"Sannah, Doran, what in the name of all things Force related are the two of you doing?"*
"What does it look like we're doing?" Sannah said, gently scooping up a young child who had been separated from his family. "We're saving everyone."
"That isn't part of the mission plan. You're endangering everyone else who's come here."
"We're Jedi, Master Horn," Sannah shot back. "And I'm going to continue to be a Jedi even if the mission calls for me to be a soldier. I can't just leave these people behind and feel good about myself if I do."
"And Doran?"

"Hey, I'm her boyfriend, it's practically in the rules that I have to support my girlfriend no matter how crazy the plan is," Doran said glibly. "And I'm a Jedi too, and I happen to agree with her."
There was a very long silence in response. During that time the last of the holding pens were open and the remaining prisoners were now walking along with Sannah and Doran back to the hangar.
"Jedi Horn?" Sannah said hesitantly.
"Listen up you two. I'm currently in the control tower of the base. There's a large contingent of Yuuzhan Vong approaching from the south, the west, and the east. North leads to the end of the runway and a very steep drop."
"What do you recommend?"
"I'm redirecting Yaqeel, Barv, Valin, Jysella, and some Mandos to back you up. The rest of us are going to get onboard our evac and put our heads together. We'll find some way to get all of you off the planet."
"A change of heart?" Doran asked.
"No," Corran said sourly. *"I'm obviously not going to change your minds, so the next best thing I can do is keep the bunch of you alive. We'll talk about this once the mission is over. Corran, out."*
Doran raised his eyebrows at his girlfriend. "Uh oh, we're in trouble."
Sannah, who had her arms full with two young children, glanced at her charges and tilted her chin up. "More than worth it."
"Yeah," Doran exhaled. "Now let's see if we can't get out of *this* mess now."
[o-o-[III]-o-o]
They were very high above the bank of fluffy white clouds below them. The wind whipped their hair and clothing incessantly, and the air was cool and moist, making the rocky ground beneath their feet slick. A single misstep would send them plummeting to their death.
And they also had an army of die-hard zealots chasing them and a small zoo of genetically engineer creatures in front of them.
And a couple of coralskippers zooming around trying to blast them off the narrow passageway.
And a mission to retrieve samples of whatever it was that was being developed within the Neimoidian city high in the sky.
And several millions of tons of Neimoidian city to drop down on top of a Yuuzhan Vong shaper city below after retrieving said samples.
And a very dire need to get a new, safer job without all those life-or-death situations.
A plasma blast shook the rocky ground beneath Jaina Solo's feet and her hand darted out to snag Vale before the Neimoidian pilot disappeared over the ledge.

"Thanks," Vale panted.
"No problem," Jaina said.
"Look, the city's support structures are directly above uz," Tesar hissed, pointing upwards to the thick bundles of metal cables and walkways that held up the city.
"Look, an army of angry Yuuzhan Vong are directly below us," Jaina said with a sarcastic smile.
"When aren't they angry?" Tilath Keer laughed.
One of the other commandos didn't look as happy. "There's no way we can get the samples now and hope to hold this location."
"I copy," Jaina said through clenched jaw. She held up her comlink. "Colonel Dorja, this is Solo. Considering the circumstances, I think we should scrub our secondary objective and just proceed with the blowing up of everything."
"Negative. Jedi Kwaad and two others have already entered the city and are proceeding to execute the secondary objective. The rest of us used our supply of explosives to bring down the passageway in the rock formation behind us and are currently searching for more explosives to take out the supports."
Jaina expressed her exasperation with several choice Corellian swear words and then held up the comlink again. "Understood. We'll do the same on this side then, but we also have 'skips buzzing around. You do realize that blocking off the only way out means that we'll be on this city when it falls, right?"
"One thing at a time, Colonel Solo. Let's hope your Yuuzhan Vong friends are successful in procuring a way off this planet."
"Nothing good ever comes from an optimistic Imperial," Jaina groaned.
"And history shows you Rebels have always had success in blowing up big things in the face of impossible odds. I'm not worried."
"That makes one of us," Jaina said with a shake of her head. "Okay. We'll let Tahiri's group get the samples. In the meantime my team will try to make our way up to the support cables and hold our position there."
"I'll relay the message, Colonel Dorja out."
A blast bug whizzed upwards and exploded only a few meters away.
"Alright, we only have a little way's to go," Jaina yelled. "Set the explosive we brought with us all along the path and in the cave we're approaching. We'll find something else to take out the cables. On Tahiri's signal, we're bringing this city down."
"And our way out of here?" A voice called out.

"Still to be determined," Jaina said professionally. "We have our orders. Let's make sure we send the Yuuzhan Vong in this base to wherever Tsavong and their buddies have gone."

[o-o-[IV]-o-o]

Tahiri closed her eyes briefly as she concentrated on the city around her. The towering Neimoidian structures—gilded with gold and other precious stones, and fitted with rows upon rows of sleek silver and black windows in an ostentatious display of wealth—glimmered all around her as she, Tekli, and Zindra halted on the outskirts of what could be considered the bridge-city's 'downtown' district.

"Tahiri?" Tekli said, looking more than a little worn out by their adventure. Running up a near vertical incline being chased by genetically engineered beasts who wanted nothing more than to turn her into a chew toy or their next meal, would do that to anyone.

Tahiri held up a hand, steadying her breathing. She hadn't told anyone yet, even Anakin or Jaina, but since her time on Zonama Sekot, she had become more in tune with the Force than ever. And not just the Force. Since curing Shaeri, her Vongsense had become sharper, easier to utilize. At first she had passed it off as a fluke, but when she began sensing nearby Freed Yuuzhan Vong back on Mon Calamari, without even consciously utilizing Vongsense, she realized that something had changed. That she had achieved a unity between the Force and the Yuuzhan Vong that not even Anakin or Jacen had been able to achieve. She didn't quite know what to think of her newfound ability. She was both proud, but also nervous and scared. Scared not of Anakin's reaction, she had enough confidence to know that he loved her unconditionally, but scared because she was now stepping into the unknown all by herself. Before, it had always been her following in Anakin's shadow, doing things that someone else had already accomplished or thought up of. Even the brief period where she had accepted the darker aspect of her own soul, killing with the Force, was something that had been done by Anakin and Alema before her. But now, now she was heading into a whole new part of the Force and she really had no one to turn to for guidance.

On one hand, she was first and foremost a Jedi, sworn to uphold galactic peace and protect those in need. Her duty was to the Force, to serving it and seeing that it was kept in balance. On the other, she was for all intents and purposes, culturally Yuuzhan Vong. A race that existed outside of the Force as most all Jedi knew it. A race that even Jacen and Anakin, two of the strongest Jedi of their age group, still struggled to understand and sense.

But sensing Yuuzhan Vong had become as natural to her as breathing. They were no longer 'outside of the Force' to her, but part of how she perceived the Force as one whole. Like Sannah's life current-sensing, Tekli's Living Force beliefs, Alema and Jysella's rhythmic interpretation of the Force, or Jacen's ability to sync himself with the living plants and animals around him, the Force to her now included the Yuuzhan Vong. Where most Jedi scoffed at the impossibility and ridiculousness of sensing Yuuzhan Vong in the Force, she now wondered what was wrong with *them* for being unable to sense the Yuuzhan Vong in the first place.

After Zonama Sekot, it was as if a whole new galaxy had been opened to her—one where the Yuuzhan Vong were simply another aspect of the Force that she could subconsciously call upon.

This was the Force to her, something only she could perceive.

And at the moment it was telling her that they were about to be in for a world of trouble.

"We still have about sixteen more blocks until we reach that tower," Tekli gestured to the distant spire at the center of the city.

What had once been a towering, two-hundred story building now had a Yuuzhan Vong structure affixed to the top of it. It was a massive, disc-shaped coralline structure that connected the top of the tower to the arch of the rock formation above it. It wasn't the only building to have been modified. All around, the high-rises their Neimoidian builders had spent millions of credits on, had coral-like add-ons to the tops or sides of the buildings. Almost like massive limpets, Yuuzhan Vong damuteks and shelters were glued onto and jutting out of the towering structures all around them.

And every last one of those Yuuzhan Vong structures contained within them not only more of the menagerie of Shaped creatures they had been facing, but dozens upon dozens of warriors, shapers, and a Force presence she didn't recognize.

Sixteen blocks of clutter-filled streets with a literal army of Yuuzhan Vong above their heads.

"Sixteen blocks and several hundred floors," Zindra gestured to their ultimate goal.

Tahiri opened her eyes and held up her comlink. "Colonel Dorja, status?"

"We've located several older fusion power plants being used to keep the lower levels of the city powered. We'll be using a heavy lifter to move the fuel rods, and then create a thermal nuclear reaction to blow apart the supporting cables."

"Okay, Tekli, Zindra, and I will *not* be meeting up with you. Once you have the charges in place, and have confirmed everything with Jaina's group, get out of there and blow the cables."
"And you, Jedi Kwaad?"
Tahiri gazed out at the plethora of Yuuzhan Vong structures, sensing the multitude of lives within them. If they fell back to Vana's group, they'd only bring that army with them. And already down to half-strength, the dozen or so commandos wouldn't have lasted long against that onslaught. "We'll find our own way out. Tahiri, out."
"We will?" Zindra blinked.
"Yeah," Tahiri said, mentally plotting out a path through the urban sprawl. "Don't worry, you're with two Jedi."
Zindra shook her head, checking the charges of the twin blasters she was carrying. "Don't you know that those words and Tekli's and yours' presences is the *worst* combination for me? In holovids, that non-important extra without any powers *always* gets killed off. *Especially* after being told not to worry."
"Do you want me to jinx us further by asking 'what could possibly go…'?"
"You finish that sentence and I'm blasting you, wingman or no," Zindra glowered. "Us pilots are supposed to be a superstitious bunch, remember?"
Tahiri and Zindra shared a small smile. Tekli just rolled her eyes and muttered something about insane, injury-prone soldiers and Jedi under her breath. "You do realize that if either of you gets yourselves stabbed, it'll be me that has to sew you back up as we run for our lives?"
"You've done it before," Tahiri said. "In fact, you even fixed up Anakin while we were levitating you and being bombarded by magma-spitters. You're the best healer qualified for life-or-death surgeries during life-and-death situations."
Now it was Tekli's turn to mock-glare at Tahiri. "Just because I'm good at it doesn't mean I enjoy having my hands in yours or any of my friends' insides. So you and Zindra better stay in one piece or I'll make sure I fix you up so that you'll be confined to bed-rest for several months!"
"Roger, doc," Zindra saluted and Tahiri stepped back in mock fear of the tiny Chadra Fan's wrath. "So, do either of you wise Jedi have a plan to get us through…that." She gestured towards the labyrinth of Vong-infested buildings ahead of them.
Tahiri and Tekli glanced at each other once, shrugged, and then nodded.

Tekli answered first. "We run."
"Really, really fast," Tahiri added.
"And how are we going to get off a city whose supports will probably explode while we're still on it?"
"I have a Plan B," Tahiri said, smiling cheerfully. "Don't worry, Zindra. Tekli and I have been in far crazier situations. Now have you stretched properly? The last thing we want is for you to pull a muscle?"
"I hate you, you know that?" Zindra groaned. "I swear, this is the last time I'm ever happily volunteering to go along on some Jedi-led mission."
"So you'll unhappily volunteer?" Tekli asked with a tilt of her head.
Zindra looked at the Chadra Fan through narrowed eyes, but nodded. "But I'll be a very unhappy, kicking-and-screaming, better-get-a-huge-hazardous-pay-bonus type of volunteer."
Tahiri and Tekli glanced at each other and shrugged again. "Works for us."
The three exchanged one last weak smile before taking in and letting out several deep breaths.
"Okay," Zindra breathed. "Let's do this."
[o-o-[V]-o-o]
"For a command ship, that's kind of small," Zekk said, tilting his head at the approaching Yuuzhan Vong light cruiser.
"The *Emerald Crèche* is an older vessel," their Yuuzhan Vong Shamed One pilot, Ezkahl, said. "And this planet is not considered essential to the war effort."
"Makes sense," Mallie shrugged. "It might have been a glowing example of Imperial pride, but under the New Republic it became a backwater."
"I guess we're lucky Corulag isn't so important to anyone else," Rahm said. "Otherwise the Vong might have had more ships guarding it."
"Commander Shen'g still sees himself as vital to the war effort, however," the pilot continued, bringing their ship closer to the *Suuv Ban D'krid*-class cruiser.
"I love those type of people," Ganner grinned.
The other Jedi looked at him warily.
"Oh Great God Rhysode, God of Swollen Egos, what do you have planned now?" Zekk said in monotone.
"In a moment," Ganner held up a hand. He checked back with the pilot. "We're sure Oz is greeting us?"
"You heard him yourself. He is more than eager to take credit and be posted elsewhere," the pilot said with a smirk.

"And as the loyal subordinate to a man in charge of three picketships and a small cruiser, the commander of this picketship should be more than eager to obey? For the good of the Yuuzhan Vong, of course."
"You know us well, Rhysode."
"And the number of warriors onboard his ship?"
"There are still close to two hundred warriors still onboard the *Emerald Crèche.* All others were moved to more important regions in the war."
"You know this for certain?" Zekk said.
The Shamed One nodded. "Yes, I have a cousin on the command ship whose duty it is to prepare the meals for the warriors. He…has sympathies to your Freed Yuuzhan Vong movement and has been trying to convince me to join."
"Back to the warriors," Ganner said. "So, there are two hundred in the cruiser. And what, another two dozen or so in the other picket-ships?"
"Yes," the pilot said after a moment of thought.
"Even if we take out the commander, what's to stop another one of his subordinates from stepping in?" Mallie said worriedly. "Corulag is still completely defenseless to any orbital attack."
"And being a die-hard warrior, Oz will probably die, or his subordinates would kill him, before allowing us to use him as some sort of hostage," Rahm added.
"On the bright side, as someone with an overinflated ego, Commander Shen'g will probably bring very few people onto this ship with him. He wants to be seen by his subordinates as someone who can singlehandedly drag the 'great' Ganner Rhysode off this ship." Zekk rubbed at his forehead, as if saying the word 'great' had pained him.
"That's what I'm counting on," Ganner nodded. "Once Shen'g and whoever else he brings with him is on board, we take them out. Then, we have our warrior buddies give out a call to whatever number of warriors are waiting outside that I've escaped and that they need assistance in catching me again. Those warriors come in, we take them out. And repeat until they learn not to send anyone into the ship. At that point, we should probably get off the ship as soon as possible because by then they'll probably blow it up."
"Anyone have any better plan?"
"I really wish I did," Mallie closed her eyes. "But, since I don't let's do this. At least we're not *negotiating* or doing anything that doesn't involve the deactivation of lightsabers. It'll be a straight up sneaky fight."
"That's the spirit."
"We are docking with the *Emerald Crèche* now," the pilot alerted.
"Well," Natua exhaled. "Here goes nothing."

[o-o-[VI]-o-o]

"We all ready?" Doran called out.

"As we'll ever be," Bazel called back from the cockpit of the mega-bus. He was assisting the drivers of the massive vehicle while Doran, Sannah, Yaqeel, Valin, Jysella, and a squad of heavily armed Mandalorians were planted onto its roof.

"Okay, let's get this thing rolling."

The mega-bus growled back to life and began to pull out of the dilapidated hangar it had been abandoned in. Pieces of debris and clouds of dust rose up as the half-fallen roof proceeded to collapse all the way. Nevertheless, the vehicle exited the hangar and began to rumble out onto the runway.

Seconds later, a plasma barrage from high orbit completely obliterated the hangar and its surroundings.

"That was too close!" Bazel yelped.

"Take us between the buildings, we're sitting ducks out in the open!" Doran ordered.

The heavy bus turned as best it could and headed for the mix of Yuuzhan Vong and duracrete structures that made up the shipyards. Another plasma barrage blew apart the ground next to them and peppered the vehicle with debris.

"Go faster!" Sannah yelled.

"I'm going as fast as this thing can go!"

More plasma continued to rain down and the surrounding base began to resemble a small inferno as buildings went up in flames.

"This is Corran, you have several fast moving Vong ground transports heading your way. Make a turn and head back out to the runway."

"Bazel here, are you crazy?" The vehicle rocked back and forth as it rolled over several abandoned speeders and a smaller structure.

"What's left of the base's garrison has regrouped. We're going to be setting off the charges while they're still clustered together," Kyp Durron's voice answered. "*You <u>don't</u> want to be in the base when we do."*

"Alright," Bazel shook his head. "Heading back out."

All around, plasma blasts continued to obliterate buildings and set the debris aflame. The mega-bus was shaken with one deafening blast after another, the Jedi and Mandalorians on the roof struggling to hold on.

The moment the bus was clear of the structures, however, the bombardment unexpectedly ended.

"The guns, they've stopped!" Jysella called out unnecessarily.

"Behind us!" Dinua yelled.

The group hurried to the rear of the vehicle and saw a herd of squat, four-legged creatures charging towards them at a rapid pace. On the backs of the fairly familiar large lizards were dozens of Yuuzhan Vong warriors, all yelling and brandishing their amphistaffs.
"Are they riding on the backs of…krayt dragons!" Jysella gasped, eyes wide.
"They're still smaller than normal krayts. Probably juvenile ones," Jintar said with a tilt of his head.
"Maybe they were raised by the Vong?" Dinua said, very calmly raising her wrist-missile launcher and taking aim. The projectile spiraled out and blew off half of the head of one of the rampaging giant lizards.
"Who cares? They're still *krayt dragons*!" Jysella shouted.
"Vong-modified krayt dragons," Doran said blankly.
"I hate Vong," Valin groaned.
Razor bugs and blast bugs filled the air around them in a storm of deadly buzzing and whooshing.
The Mandalorians promptly went prone and opened fire with everything they had. The Vong-modified krayt dragons screeched and dodged, continuing to close the distance. Lightsabers flared as the Jedi did their best to shield themselves and the Mandalorians from the swarm of deadly projectiles.
"We can't block them all," Yaqeel hissed, a razor bug winging her arm.
Several of the modified krayts began to run parallel to the mega-bus and warriors jumped on from all sides. At the same time, the krayts would ram against the mega-bus's tires, sending the large vehicle into nearly uncontrollable swerves.
In the background, the shipyards and shaper buildings exploded in violent plumes of blue and red flame as the charges set by the assault team were detonated all at once. Not that the assaulting Yuuzhan Vong or defending Jedi and Mandalorians had time to care about or appreciate it.
The Mandalorians tried to pick off as many of the boarding Vong as they could, but the scarred alien warriors clawed their way up to the top nonetheless and engaged the defenders at close range. They were on all sides, charging the defenders the moment they had a footing on the roof of the mega-bus.
To make matters worse, a manta-ray like creature swooped in from overhead, and more warriors fast-roped down on vine-like ropes.
"Corran, Master Durron, I hope you guys have a plan!" Bazel yelled, jerking the steering column to send a bunch of Yuuzhan Vong warriors flying off the side of the bus.
"Keep going straight down the runway."

"What type of plan is that!"
"A very good one that Durron came up with."
"We're doomed," Valin groaned.
"Hey!" Kyp said indignantly. *"All you have to do is drive off a cliff."*
"We're doomed," Bazel repeated mournfully.
On top of the vehicle, the Jedi and Mandalorians were in a fight for their lives. The moment they dispatched one Yuuzhan Vong, two more warriors seemed to climb on and take his place. The manta-ray creature continued to make diving passes, dropping more warriors off at inopportune moments.
One of the Mandalorians was hit across the head with an amphistaff and tumbled off of the moving bus. Another was stabbed and hurled off by a muscular warrior. The warrior was promptly cut down by Valin, but the damage had been done.
Jysella, having learned her lesson on Mandalore, kept her guard up. The thirteen year old Jedi swiveled around one amphistaff, and then leaped over two more. Weaving in and out of the lethal attacks, a small part of her found the movements oddly familiar. As if she was dancing. Twisting once more, Jysella managed to impale a Yuuzhan Vong and unbalance another. The bus shook again and the unbalanced warrior toppled off the side. The youngest of the Jedi was in constant motion, flitting about between the taller Yuuzhan Vong warriors and forcing them to react to her instead of the other way around.
Jintar and Dinua were back to back, dual blaster pistols discharging yellow bolts of superheated material at point-blank range. A warrior tried to leap down from the manta-ray creature, only to receive to bolts of plasma for his trouble. One tried to climb up the side of the bus and grab at Jintar's leg. A face full of plasma was all that greeted him. Jintar took a momentary pause in the fighting to blast a krayt dragon that had been running alongside the bus right between the eyes, stopping the lizard in its tracks. When their blasters ran out of energy, the two Supercommandos switched to their wrist blades and began engaging the innumerous Yuuzhan Vong at close range.
"You know, after Mandalore, this really isn't anything," Doran said conversationally, kicking a warrior off the bus and then whirling around to cover his girlfriend.
"After Mandalore, I doubt anything will rattle me," Sannah retorted.
"Barv's right, flirt later!" Yaqeel yelled.
"Corran, we're running out of road," Bazel said nervously.
"*Keep going. Master Durron told you, remember? Drive off the cliff."*
"He was serious?"
"*Yup."*

The manta-ray Vong transport swooped back in. This time Yaqeel and Valin nodded at each other and used the Force to leap high into the air to greet it. Landing on its back, much to the surprise of the Yuuzhan Vong on top of it, the two Jedi then plunged their lightsabers into the head of the beast. The effect was instantaneous. The creature bucked, groaned, and then began to spasm. The warriors were unceremoniously thrown off its back, and the two Jedi beat a hasty retreat; timing their leaps so that they landed on the top of the mega-bus once more.
"Show offs," Doran smirked at Valin.
"You and Sannah aren't the only ones with moves," Valin retorted, briefly watching the manta-ray come crashing down onto the runway behind them.
"End of the road coming up!" Bazel yelled out.
The Mandalorians and other Jedi quickly flattened themselves to the roof of the vehicle. The remaining Yuuzhan Vong weren't so fast. As the bus pitched over the edge of the cliff, the alien warriors were all hurled off and plummeted alongside the vehicle.
"What's next?" Bazel yelled into his comm.
"*This…"*
A Yuuzhan Vong frigate swooped in and vine-like ropes shot out and wrapped themselves around the massive falling mega-bus. The bus jerked violently as it came to a halt, jarring those on top of it even further. Very slowly, the vines began to retract, pulling the bus upwards and towards the open hangar-like opening of the frigate.
"If that was revenge for us adding that rescue mission, that wasn't very nice," Sannah breathed into her comlink, her other hand clutching her rapidly beating heart.
Before the frigate could veer away from the cliff-side, however, a group of eight individuals promptly leaped off the end of the runway and landed onto the cradled mega-bus.
Sannah, Doran, and Yaqeel all blanched. "Not these guys again."
"'These guys'?" Valin said, sensing his friends' nervousness.
"Force sensitive Vong experiments created from the cells of dead Jedi," Sannah said woodenly.
"Oh," Jysella gasped.
A line of lightsabers activated.
The Jedi weakly stood once more, and the remaining Mandalorians held up their blasters uncertainly.
"Corran, Master Durron, we have a small problem," Bazel said, undoing his seat's harness and hurrying through the mega-bus.
"We sensed a disturbance in the Force."

"The others are looking at that disturbance as we speak," Barv tried to keep his tone light. "We're going to need your help."
"We're on our way down. Hang in there."
On the roof, the two sides charged each other and a violent crackle echoed as lightsabers and amphistaffs clashed once more.
[o-o-[VII]-o-o]
With the help of Tahiri's Force-enhanced Vongsense, she, Tekli, and Zindra managed to avoid the numerous patrols and wildlife searching for them as they stealthily made their way in and out of building lobbies and stuck to the shadows. It didn't help that the Yuuzhan Vong still had voxyn with them, both the regular and mutated kind, but at least the trio had managed to stay one step ahead of the Force-aware creatures. Even still, the constant howls of the voxyn echoed through the vacant streets and reminded them that they were nowhere near safe despite the fact that they had yet to be spotted.
"According to the layout of the city, we can cut through those buildings there. There should be an alleyway that leads to a transit station. From there, we run across the mag-rail for the rest of the way. There's a tram station on the sixty-third floor of our objective, so we don't have to worry about blasting our way all the way up there." Zindra said, studying a holo-readout of the city's map.
"Alright," Tekli nodded. She glanced to Tahiri. "Is the coast clear?"
Tahiri's head bobbed once. "But only just. We're going to have to be quick about it. I think several voxyn patrols have caught our scent."
The three sprinted cautiously from building to building, the howls behind them reminding them that they didn't have any room for a single mistake. The minutes passed with only the distant sounds of approaching patrols and the rapid footfalls of their own feet and heavy breathing filling the air. Reaching their first destination, they ducked into a towering high-rise. Naturally, the turbolifts were no longer functioning, so they were forced to use the emergency stairwells. They were making good time when a disturbance in the Force washed over them.
"Tahiri," Tekli muttered as they ascended a staircase towards the tram-way. They were already fifty floors up, and the view down was dizzying.
"I know, I sense them too," Tahiri said in a low voice.
"More trouble?" Zindra glanced at the two Jedi.
"Most likely," Tekli confirmed. "I can sense them, and I normally can't sense Yuuzhan Vong Vongsense or otherwise."
"They can sense us too," Tahiri added.
"Wait, the Yuuzhan Vong have their own Jedi now?" Zindra hissed.

"I don't know," Tahiri exhaled. "But whatever they are, we're going to end up meeting them. Voxyn and warriors I can help us avoid. These… things, are Force sensitive and can track us using the Force."
"Great," Zindra muttered.
The trio reached the top of the stairwell. The power was out in the station, and the mag-lev cars were inoperable, but the several meter-wide metal rail was still in good condition. They used the car to climb onto the rail, glancing down the stretch of track.
"Here goes nothing," Tekli breathed, and they began the ten-block trek towards the towering structure in the distance.

[o-o-[VIII]-o-o]

Jaina was in the process of boring a hole into one of the city's supporting cables when she felt her heart skip a beat. She immediately jerked her head up, breathing heavily. Nearly an hour ago, her team had stumbled across the city's starport. Docked within were several heavy freighters and other crafts. All with perfectly working power cores. The plan was to jury-rig a set of explosives from those power cores and embed them in the holes she in Tesar were making. Everything had been going fine until the sudden dread that had filled her.
Something was wrong in the Force.
From across the way, she could see Tesar taste the air with his forked tongue, his tail thumping in agitation.
"Colonel Solo?" Vale said, worriedly.
"Vale, take over," Jaina said, freeing her lightsaber.
The Neimoidian was confused, but nodded. "And you?"
"Tesar and I have something to…do."
On the city-end of the support cables, a set of seven individuals emerged. They were smaller than an average Yuuzhan Vong warrior, and almost looked human in appearance.
"Keep working," Jaina said tersely. "We've got this."
Jaina and Tesar abandoned the rest of the team and steadily walked across two of the thicker support cables back towards the city-side anchors. The seven individuals leaped into the air and landed on the opposite side of the cables, weapons uncurling from around their wrists and flying up from their waists.
"More Vong trickz," Tesar said, eyes narrowing.
"Force-sensitive, too," Jaina nodded. "This isn't going to be easy."
"When haz it ever been easy?" Tesar chuckled deeply, activating his lightsaber.

Jaina's own violet blade shimmered into existence. She glanced over the edge of the cable she was standing on. "Good point. Watch your footing, it's a long way down."
"For the Vong-trickz, it iz," Tesar nodded.
And in unison, the seven individuals activated their own lightsabers.
"Seven of them, two of uz," Tesar noted.
Jaina forced a grim smile. "I almost feel sorry for them."
A second later, a line of Yuuzhan Vong warriors assembled on the city-side anchors and began to clamber down onto the supporting cables. One warrior slipped on the mist-slickened metal surface and let out a startled cry as he plummeted off the cable and through the layer of thick clouds below. The others, however, kept their footing and advanced behind the lightsaber and amphistaff-wielding beings.
"A hundred of them and two of uz," Tesar amended.
"Now I *really* feel sorry for them," Jaina said, exhaling and immersing herself in the Force. Tesar likewise followed suit, using the meld with Jaina to coordinate their first movements. Sensing her plan, Tesar looked at her in alarm.
"You cannot be serious?"
"Have a better idea?" Jaina said with a raised eyebrow.
Tesar blinked, then let out a hissing laugh. "It'z been far too long since thiz one has followed one of your insane ideaz, Stickz."
"I know, I almost missed coming up with them," Jaina glanced back up at the approaching Yuuzhan Vong, then tapped her comlink. "Colonel Dorja, you and your team should probably get to some place that won't throw you over the edge of the city if things suddenly become unbalanced."
"Do I really want to know?"
"Hey, you teamed with Ganner," Jaina said with a faint smile. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors were still piling over the anchors and onto the cables by the dozens. "You know what us Jedi do."
"Unfortunately. Your advice is understood, I'm having my people move to secure positions now. What of Jedi Kwaad?"
Jaina briefly touched the younger Jedi through the Force, feeling a brief affirmative in response. "She's aware of the plan."
"We're secure now. Do whatever it is you're going to do. I would advise you to do it soon, there are Yuuzhan Vong warriors heading in our direction and we won't be secure for long."
"Don't worry, I kind of know what I'm doing. Colonel Solo, out." Jaina switched frequencies to her own team. "Vale, get everyone back to the rock formation-side anchors and blow what charges you've set."
"Jaina, we've set less than two-thirds of them."

"That's enough."
"Jaina, you're still <u>on</u> the cables."
"Yup, along with a small detachment of Yuuzhan Vong and some new Vong experimental soldier. Have you cleared everyone yet?"
After a brief pause. *"We're all back on the rock formation, ready to detonate on your signal."*
Jaina and Tesar exchanged feral grins, cocking their heads in morbid amusement. "Blow the charges!"
A deafening roar erupted behind them as metal and flame exploded outwards. The pressure wave from the powerful blast washed over everyone, knocking several more warriors over the edge.
Metal groaned and creaked, before equally loud snapping noises shook the ground the combatants were standing on. Those standing on the more intact cables were bucked and tossed about like ragdolls as the vibrations traversed the length of the thick cables. Several of the supporting cables shuddered violently, while others snapped about in the high winds of the Neimoidian bridge city.
Smaller cables, one end severed by the blast, lashed about like serpentine whips, sweeping about in a purely random fashion. Two larger cables likewise gave in, fatigued metal groaning and straining as thick cable suddenly sagged with a violent shudder. Warriors by the dozen were deposited into the distant cloudbank below, disappearing out of sight, their screams of defiance fading in the wind.
Metallic echoing and thumping sounded all around them as freed cables jerked and thrashed like tentacle limbs.
More cables buckled as the added weight they were forced to take up caused them to undulate and jerk against their anchors.
And while all this was happening, the seven Slayers charged down the twisting and writhing supporting cables as if it were flat ground.
Meanwhile Tesar and Jaina leaped from cable to cable in time with the pulsating undulations. They didn't seem to care that the footing they were on was far from stable, or that one false move would have them joining the dozens of warriors in a lethal drop. The Force was guiding their movements.
Meanwhile, as a majority of the supporting cables ripped free and the fighters clashed in a chaotic frenzy, the entire bridge city shuddered, creaking ominously.
A loud snapping noise echoed over the whistling of the high winds. And then abruptly, in a deafening crash, the entire city listed to one side.
It was pandemonium for those still on the city. Glass shattered, duracrete ruptured, abandoned speeders careened out of control, and

small explosions erupted throughout the once gleaming example of Neimoidian civilization. Some of the buildings, weakened by repeated impacts from larger pieces of debris, succumbed to the sudden change in gravity and ripped apart at the seams. The downward trajectory of the debris took out even more buildings, and the bridge city began to empty its contents down onto the Yuuzhan Vong city below.

Not that Jaina, Tesar, or the Slayers were concerned about the city at the moment.

They were small specks against the larger chaotic backdrop of browns, whites, and greens; darting and leaping about with inhuman speed and coordination. It was a lethal battle in a lethal setting, and not everyone was going to get through it alive.

[o-o-[IX]-o-o]

They were almost across the mag-lev rail, passing over a gap between the city platforms and staring at nothing but the white clouds below, when Jaina's warning came through the Force meld. Both Tekli and Tahiri looked at each other, wide-eyed, before quickly pulling out a length of cable from their utility belts.

"Zindra!" Tahiri called out in warning.

The Twin Suns pilot saw what they were doing and immediately began to emulate them. "Crazy Jedi plan?"

"When are our plans *not* crazy?" Tahiri said with a weak smile, sending the cable flying around the rail so that she was more or less anchored to it.

Zindra began to secure her own line when she looked up by chance and saw a dozen Yuuzhan Vong warriors quickly making their way across the narrow rail. "We have warriors!"

"Shouldn't matter," Tahiri said. "Just secure yourself."

Zindra anxiously tightened the knot and lowered herself to the rail like Tekli and Tahiri had done. "Just out of curiosity, what *is* the crazy plan this time?"

"Three," Tekli said, closing her eyes and breathing heavily in anticipation. "Two…"

"You're about to find out," Tahiri said.

"One!"

There was a pause, and then a shockwave blasted outwards as the entire city shook and twisted. Zindra let out a cry of alarm as she was jostled about. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors who had been approaching them likewise let out panicked shouts as the entire world around them seemed to buck and twist uncontrollably. Some fell, others quickly retreated back to the towering high rise they had come from.

After several initial moments of intense turbulence, the entire city went quiet. And then everyone could hear it, the faintest of groans of fatigued metal. Another second, and bridge city canted towards one side in jarring diagonal shift.
Zindra rapidly said a prayer to all of the gods she knew of, swearing to never blindly follow a Jedi into certain-death situations ever again as she clung to the mag-lev rail for dear life.
A tumbling speeder from an upper-story garage hurled downwards like a ballistic missile and exploded in a blaze of fire when it came in contact with part of the very rail the two Jedi and one terrified pilot were clinging to. More speeders and other unsecured debris began to rain downwards, pelting the area with burning shrapnel.
Now literally dangling from the rail thanks to the shift of gravity, both Tekli and Tahiri immediately put all their effort into redirecting the debris.
"Colonel Dorja," Tahiri said into the comlink. "Given the change in circumstances, can we abandon our secondary objective?"
"We've already called for our evac."
"Right, go ahead and picked up Jaina's team as well, Tekli, Zindra, and I will call our own ride when we're able to."
"I copy. Good luck."
"Yeah," Tahiri said, her voice strained as she teamed up with Tekli to keep a tumbling cargo transport from squashing them.
"Warriors are back!" Zindra yelled in warning. Though dangling, she drew her blasters again, trusting her Jedi partners not to let some stray piece of debris smash her to a pulp.
Seemingly satisfied that the city had moved all that it was going to, the warriors were once again climbing onto the mag-lev rail. Two of them hurled thud-bugs at their immobile opponents, but Zindra promptly blasted the projectiles in mid-flight. But as more Yuuzhan Vong came into view and held up an array of thud and razor bugs, it was pretty obvious she wouldn't be able to stop all of the projectiles thrown in their direction.
"I'm going to need a little help here!" Zindra called back.
"Go," Tekli nodded to Tahiri. "I can cover the three of us."
Tahiri gripped her supporting cable and pulled herself upwards. Debris continued to rain down all around them, in a seemingly never-ending shower of lethalness. Tahiri used the Force to snag a falling speeder from the sky and sent it flying down the length of the rail.
The warriors who had climbed onto the rail were bowled off, screaming as they joined the collection of debris disappearing into the cloud bank below.

As Tekli climbed onto the rail and Zindra was making her way up, Tahiri pulled down a falling power generator and threw it towards the high-rise entryway in an attempt to clear it of any remaining warriors. What the blond Jedi hadn't counted on, however, was another Force grip to suddenly snag it out of mid-air and hurl it with bullet-like speed back in her direction.
"Down!" Tahiri yelled. Both she and Tekli dove off over the edge, just managing to grab one of Zindra's legs each before they plummeted to their doom.
"Ow, ow, ow," Zindra said through clenched teeth, gripping onto the cable with a white-knuckled grip. The metal line was digging through the leather gloves she was wearing, and the added weight of both Tahiri and Tekli was straining her already sore arms.
Tekli quickly closed her eyes and concentrated on the pilot, alleviating the muscle strains with the Force and giving her a temporary boost in strength.
"Thanks," Zindra managed, her voice strangled as the three of them continued to dangle over the white fluffy clouds below.
Tekli nodded, and both she and Tahiri began to scale Zindra's body and back up onto the railway. Zindra wasted little time in joining them this time, slowly unclipping her cable as she reached the top.
"What was that?" the pilot asked.
"You know the things I was sensing earlier?" Tahiri said, green eyes narrowed as she gazed across the pock-marked railway.
"Yeah?"
"They can definitely use the Force."
"Oh."
"And they're coming for us right now," Tekli pointed.
The smaller than an average Yuuzhan Vong warrior figures dropped down onto the railway without any hesitation or fear in their movements. Their black, carapace-like skin seemed to blend in with the natural grays and blacks of the buildings around them. Their muscular stature and purpose-filled red eyes, when combined with the Force aura they emitted, made it clear that they were bred with the sole purpose to kill any and all who stood in their way.
Fortunately the rail was only wide enough for them to approach one at a time.
Unfortunately, on either side of Tahiri, Tekli, and Zindra was a several kilometer drop and the way back had been destroyed during the shower of debris.

"Colonel Dorja, never mind. I think we can get a research sample after all," Tahiri said into the comlink, holding up her lightsaber and letting her amphistaff grow rigid in her other hand.
"Really? That's the first bit of good news this mission has had so far."
"Yeah, it's just getting the sample that might be hard," Tahiri said conversationally. "The..errr..specimens, might be a bit uncooperative."
There was a heavy sigh on the other end of the line. *"I really don't want to know. Our team will be onboard the evac ship in another three minutes. You sure you don't want us to swing by to pick you up?"*
"Two of us might need a pick-up, they'll contact you soon. Tahiri Kwaad, out" Tahiri said, floating her comlink back into her pocket and eyeing the approaching Slayers. More to herself than anything, she muttered. "Don't worry, we'll be just fine."
Hers and Tekli's lightsabers activated.
Two columns of purple blade came to life in response.
"Is it just me, or do those lightsabers look like Anakin and Alema's?" Tekli whispered in a low voice.
"Lambent-based and yorik coral," Tahiri confirmed, wetting her lips. "Living sabers for Force-sensitive supersoliders. This keeps getting better and better."
"Where's that bright side you were talking about earlier?" Tekli said, her ears and snout twitching nervously.
"On the bright side, they haven't flown in one of their coralskippers and just blasted this section of the rail."
"There's that," Tekli admitted, eyes reflexively darting left and right in hopes that they hadn't just jinxed things. "I wonder why though."
Her question was soon answered when the Slayers advanced until only several people-lengths remained between them and the Jedi. One Slayer stepped forward, the disfiguring injury to his face setting him apart from the others. In Yuuzhan Vong, he called out against the howling winds all around them. "*We call out to the One-Who-Was-Shaped and issue a challenge!"*
Tahiri tilted her head. "A challenge?"
"Yes. We have no interest in your companions. They may leave here on the traitor-ship that has collected the others. You, however, may not."
"Explains why they haven't blasted this rail to pieces yet," Zindra said in a low voice. "It looks like your fame's gotten the better of you, Barefoot Lead. What do you want us to do?"
Tahiri stepped in front of her two friends. "You swear that you will let them leave unmolested?"
"I do."
"Then I accept your challenge," Tahiri inclined her head.

"Tahiri!" Tekli protested.
"Lead?" Zindra said at the same time.
"I've got this," Tahiri nodded to the two of them. "Go back and meet up with Colonel Dorja and the others. It's the best chance we have at getting the two of you out alive."
"And you?" Zindra said stubbornly.
"I may not be Yun-Harla, but I still have a couple of tricks up my sleeves," Tahiri said with a small cocky smirk. "Don't worry, I'm not as crazy as Anakin or Jaina just yet. I actually know what I'm doing."
"And that's the scary part," Zindra deadpanned. "You better make it out of here alive."
"I will." Tahiri looked to Tekli. "Go."
Tekli deactivated her lightsaber, and inclined her head solemnly. After everything they had gone through in the war, it was a sign of her trust in Tahiri's abilities that Tekli offered no protest. "May the Force be with you, Tahiri Kwaad."
Tahiri glanced back at the two lines of Slayers and nodded. "I'm definitely going to need it."
[o-o-[Chapter End]-o-o]
A\N: Unexpected double-update today...I'm trying to have the entire story posted by the end of next week. So go on over to chapter sixty-three and enjoy...

ADA 63

Sixty-Three
[o-o-[I]-o-o]
A manic flurry of motion was all that could be seen atop the mega-bus being airlifted from a Loronar cliff-side. Though the frigate had been in the process of winching up the mega-bus with their vine-like boarding cables, the progress had been halted due to the unexpected attack of Shimrra's newly minted Slayers. Several of the cables had already been severed, and any further motion was too dangerous while the Slayers were on the offensive.
The buzzing sounds of lightsabers slashing though the air was akin to a nest of angry hornets flitting about. The battle was unlike any the younger Jedi had ever fought. They had spent the last year and a half learning how to fight Yuuzhan Vong, not Jedi, and the Slayers were completely overwhelming them with their unorthodox Force-assisted techniques.
Two Mandalorians who had come in support of Doran and Sannah's rescue mission lay dead, their bodies sliced in two. Another

Mandalorian who had tried to go airborne with his rocket-pack was pulled down from the sky and hurled on a ballistic course back into the cliff side. The remaining Mandalorians tried to rally behind the Jedi, but the Jedi were all just fortunate to still be alive.
Yaqeel was badly injured, gripping onto her severed arm with her remaining hand and quivering in pain from another burn across her stomach. Bazel was unconscious, the victim of a powerful Force attack that had slammed him through the unforgiving metal surface of the roof of the bus and into the compartment below. And Valin was now staggering backwards as a deep purple lightsaber blade from a Slayer's lambent saber scalded his face across the bridge of his nose.
With only Sannah, Doran, and Jysella still truly in the fight for the Jedi, and all of the Slayers still on their feet, things weren't looking too good. Backed up into a tight circle on the top of the bus, the remaining Jedi and Mandalorians grimly stared down their opponents.
"You doing alright, Sella?" Sannah asked the younger girl over her shoulder. She took the brief pause in fighting to use the Force to channel away the pain from a lightsaber stab wound on right thigh and neutralize the poison from an amphistaff bite on her arm.
The thirteen year old apprentice's reddish-brown hair and armored jumpsuit were soaked with perspiration, and her arms shook as she struggled to hold her lightsaber up at the ready. "Just swell. I can do this all day."
"The sun's setting," Dinua pointed out.
"My point exactly."
As the Slayers held up their own weapons in preparation for another attack, there was a shift in the Force as a concealment was lifted from the minds of everyone. Almost immediately, the Slayers broke formation as three large figures dropped down from the frigate like miniature missiles. The three landed and wasted little time in engaging the Yuuzhan Vong-shaped fighters.
"What kept you?" Sannah called out in laughter as Lowbacca and Kyp used a simultaneous blast of Force energy to send three of the Slayers over the side of the mega-bus, while Corran deftly decapitated a fourth.
While the younger Jedi may have trained and faced only one enemy in their short lives, the older Jedi had had more than their fair share of battles against a variety of different threats and were able to quickly adapt to the Slayers' unique fighting style. The remaining Mandalorians all jetted off the mega-bus and began peppering the Slayers with well-timed laser and plasma bolts, flitting about in the sky like gnats.
And just like that, the odds had once again shifted.

"[Had to come up with another plan that would actually work]," Lowbacca rowled playfully as he, Kyp, and Corran squared off against the remaining three Slayers. "[Brave recklessness can only get you so far.]"
Jysella used the relief brought by the others to scramble to her brother's side. "Val!"
"I'm alright, Sella," the teen groaned weakly, still clutching at the fresh burn and squeezing his eyes shut. "Lightsaber blades really, really, hurt."
Meanwhile Sannah quickly moved over to comfort a traumatized Yaqeel and Doran dropped down to check on Bazel. Both of their friends were badly injured, but still alive.
"Control, get this bus back into the ship!" Corran called out, dispatching one Slayer. In the distance, the oddly-shaped coralskippers they had seen earlier were closing at a very rapid pace. Plasma flares were already beginning to fill the air, rocking the bus back and forth in its vine-like cradle. "And make it quick!"
The last two Slayers were dispatched, and the winches hauled the large transport upwards as the frigate took off towards the upper atmosphere. But the bus was only half-way lodged against the frigate's docking clamps when the ship's void defenses flashed to life. The coralskippers had caught up in record time and were bombarded it with lethal streams of molten rock.
"Jeedai, get everyone onboard through the exterior docking ports. We cannot maintain our speed and defenses against these fighters. We have to release the vehicle."
"Control, there are nearly four-hundred people in the vehicle," Kyp said, catching himself as vibrations from a plasma hit shook the bus. The Jedi and Mandalorians were in a thin, sealed-off section between the roof of the bus and the bottom-side of the frigate. The frigate wasn't designed to take on mechanic vehicles of any sort, much less a mega-bus, and only the boarding vines that held the bus in place against the membrane-like docking area were keeping the ground vehicle from a very lethal drop.
"Then you will have to be quick about it. More fighters are inbound, as are three cruisers and five more frigates."
Kyp swore and glanced at the others. "Okay new plan."
They all look to him. "And that is?"
Kyp gestured to the hole Bazel's body had made in the roof of the bus. "Barv there had the right idea. We peel off the roof and evacuate everyone."
"Peel off…the roof?" Jysella said slowly.

Kyp activated his lightsaber, walked to the edge of the bus, and drove the glowing blade through the thin metal surface. He then began to walk the length of the bus, leaving a glowing line behind him. "Like this. Only way we'll be able to get more than a couple of people out at a time. Now, we're a little rushed for time, so if you can just do as I do."
The other Jedi quickly scrambled to help, cutting away the roof of the bus even as the frigate continued to rock from continuous plasma fire. After the longest few minutes in their lives, they managed to completely severe the roof. A joint Force-effort later, and they had peeled back the metal like the top of a can. The bewildered and frightened prisoners Doran and Sannah had liberated all looked up at the Jedi with wide eyes.
"Everyone, into the ship," Kyp called out, gesturing to the docking hatches on the underside of their evacuation vessel. "As orderly and quickly as you can."
The prisoners all scrambled up out of the bus, and were assisted into the frigate. Mandalorians already within the ship helped to expedite the process. But even then, the evacuation of several hundred people took time.
Another blast of plasma fire, and this time the membrane between the bus and frigate was ruptured. A rush of cold air filled the compartment as the atmosphere was vented. Only the efforts of the Jedi managed to keep anyone from being sucked out of the breach.
"Jeedai!"
"Almost there!"
"No choice, we have to drop the transport or we'll be blown out of the sky. Dovin basals are being overloaded!"
"Do it!" Kyp yelled as the Jedi and Mandalorians gripped the last of the prisoners and dove into the frigate. The membrane door behind them slammed shut, and the mega-bus was released.
Seconds later, the heavily damaged frigate shot away from the planet and blew through the blockade that was moving into position. Once free of Loronar's gravity well, the ship beat a hasty retreat to hyperspace, leaving only a trail of burnt yorik coral in its wake.
[o-o-[II]-o-o]
Jaina grabbed hold of a flailing metal cable and allowed the momentum of it to whip her off into the air, narrowly avoiding the three glowing blades of violet that had tried to turn her into a Jedi-skewer. She deactivated her own lightsaber, the wind roaring loudly in her ears as her body soared across a several kilometer drop. At the exact moment, thanks to her Force-attuned senses, she released her grip.

Her body was launched through the fluffy white clouds, her hair fluttering wildly behind her. In a display of athleticism, she managed to grab on to another horizontal support cable and pull herself onto it. But she wasn't the only one capable of making such a daring leap. All three of her attackers had grabbed onto nearby cables and were swinging through the air after her.

Jaina blew several strands of hair out of her face and activated her lightsaber, throwing it in a dizzying spin towards her pursuers. The rotating blade managed to sever two of the cables being used by the Slayers, sending her enemies in a fatal drop through the cloudbank. The last, however, managed to bat her blade aside and finish his acrobatic leap onto the cable she was standing on.

Her lightsaber flew back into her hand just as the Slayer began to mount a blistering lambent-saber and amphistaff assault. Jaina matched blow for blow, skillfully parrying and counter-attacking each fast-paced barrage of blows. As she fought off the Slayer, some part of her found it ironic that her sparing sessions against Tahiri's own unorthodox fighting style were actually coming in handy. Not many people were used to fighting off amphistaff, lightsaber, *and* Force-based attacks, but Tahiri used all three.

With a flash of her lightsaber, she accepted an amphistaff blow to her arm to jam her lightsaber directly into the face of the Slayer she was facing. Not even the Slayer's accelerated healing abilities could heal its brain being lobotomized by a lightsaber blade.

Despite her victory, another three Slayers braved the undulating cables and high winds and began to make their way towards her. More warriors were also climbing down now that the city's shift had stabilized. It was a losing battle, and there were far more of them than of her.

She glanced over to Tesar, in time to see the Barabel use his tail to sweep the feet out from one Slayer and send the shaped creature over the edge. He too, however, was engaged in multiple opponents, and the burns and bite marks that decorated his scaly skin indicated that they were also wearing him down.

Before either Jedi could get overwhelmed, however, a Yuuzhan Vong frigate flew in directly beneath her position.

"*Colonel Solo, this is your ride out of here. I would suggest that you and your team board now before the coralskippers realize we're not on their side.*"

Jaina inhaled and nodded. "And Tahiri?"

"*She indicated that she was falling back to her Plan B. She sent both Jedi Tekli and Major Daine back with us.*"

Jaina glanced back towards the slanted bridge city, sensing her adopted little sister still going strong. "Okay, thanks for the lift."
With a single motion, both Tesar and Jaina leaped down onto the frigate, while Vale and the others quickly entered through a side air-lock.
Tahiri, Jaina sent through the Force as the frigate peeled away out from under the bridge city. Squadrons of coralskippers were already closing in.
Go ahead and tell Vana to do it. Came the blond Jedi's response
Jaina clenched her jaw, but brought her comlink up. "Colonel, go ahead and detonate your side's explosives."
"Roger."
Jaina couldn't help but ball her hands into tight fists as the improvised charged ripped apart the opposite end support cables in the same violent fashion that had annihilated the first set. The city shook, bucked, groaned, and then began to break apart as the shockwaves rippled through its formation. The rocky arch holding the city began to crumble, and soon, several hundred thousand tons of city and rock were free falling through the sky.
[o-o-[III]-o-o]
Tahiri reached out with her Force-enhanced Vongsense to her 'Plan B,' silently giving instructions as she stared down the odd-looking Force-sensitive beings in front of her. They were skilled in fighting, that much was clear, and their minds were filled with only one purpose—undying loyalty to Shimrra and the cause they were bred for. It was chilling to know that she could have easily been just like them, Shaped by Meezhan Kwaad until her only purpose was to kill all who opposed the Yuuzhan Vong.
Yet behind their stone-cold expressions, the murderous auras that radiated out from them, there was also an impossible air of innocence. They were hardened killers, but they were also only a few months old. They wanted to kill her, but at the same time wanted to make Shimrra and those they served happy, like a child wanting to please a parent. Tahiri doubted she would have sensed it if she hadn't been so attuned to the emotions and mixed Force signatures coming off of the killers before her. They were bred with one mind, one purpose, but at the same time they were just like all of the other lifeforms the Yuuzhan Vong had created or altered. They had a purpose, but they did not believe in it. They simply did as they were told because it was the only thing they knew.

Her experiences with the Yuuzhan Vong, as well as the understanding of that shadowy corner within her allowed her to understand these odd fighters on a level she didn't think possible.
Nevertheless, she managed to keep a thin smile on her face as she regarded the apparent leader of the group in front of her. The wind ruffled her clothing and strands of blond hair as she stood on the narrow trackway high above the ground. "My friends have left. What now?"
"Now, we fight and you shall die," the Slayer said emotionlessly.
"Why?" Tahiri said, her barefoot form still smaller than the compact, muscular figures of the Slayers in front of her.
"Why?"
"Why?" Tahiri nodded. "Why do we have to fight?"
"The gods demand it, Shimrra demands it."
"If the gods asked nothing of you, if Shimrra gave you no order, what would you do?"
The Slayer's forehead furrowed, as if confused. "We serve Shimrra, we serve the Yun'o, we will do as they wish. If they wish nothing of us, we shall do nothing."
Tahiri glanced at the ten others behind the leader. "And that goes for all of you? You will simply sit around like a droid, waiting for orders?"
The Slayer leader hissed, the pustule infection on his face bubbling in his anger. "You *dare* compare us to those abominations?"
"If the robes fit," Tahiri shrugged, holstering her lightsaber and allowing her amphistaff to wrap around her arm. "You appear smart, isn't the comparison pretty accurate?"
The leader stepped forward, spittle flying from his mouth as he glared down at Tahiri. "We are the Slayers, warriors of Yun-Yammka and Yun-Yuuzhan! We are no droid!"
"Then," Tahiri stepped forward until she was toe-to-toe with the Slayer. "If you received no orders, if your will was your own, what would you and your brothers be doing?"
The Slayer seemed utterly flummoxed by the question, and Slayers didn't like being confused. He brandished his amphistaff, hissing loudly. "Enough of this! You speak of the impossible! We have our orders and Shimrra has demanded your death! That is all that matters to us! And when you die, Shimrra will have another enemy for us to kill. We will safeguard his empire and eliminate all who oppose its rightful ruler."
Tahiri leaped back as the amphistaff lashed out at her.
"And when he runs out of enemies, when Shimrra rules unopposed? What use will he have for you? Do you truly think he will allow Shaped

peoples such as yours to live in a Yuuzhan Vong empire? Will he let you be considering how powerful you are, how Jedi-like you…Slayers…are?"
"Your words will not lessen our resolve, now stand and fight!"
Tahiri opened her mouth to reply, when she felt Jaina reach out to her through the Force. After digesting the message, Tahiri straightened and held the Slayer's eyes. "Some other time maybe. Fighting mindless pawns of a madman isn't exactly as fun as it used to be."
"You dare mock us?"
Go ahead and tell Vana to do it, Tahiri sent to Jaina, even as she shook her head in response to the Slayer's indignant reply. "It's not mocking if it's true. When you can think for yourselves, and if you still want to fight me then, I'll meet your challenge. But fighting on behalf of someone who isn't even brave enough to meet us on the battlefield and would rather send his disposable soldiers in his place doesn't really speak well of your judgment."
"Enough!" A Slayer roared from behind the leader, leap-frogging the others with amphistaff and lambent saber flashing, his face contorted in rage.
Tahiri's own blue saber flashed once, severing the amphistaff-holding arm. The blond Jedi caught the severed limb, ducking under the owner's lambent saber strike. Rather than engage the warrior, however, she then surprised the Slayers by leaping off the mag-lev rail and disappearing into the clouds below.
At the same time, the charges Vana's team had planted detonated. The Slayers quickly scrambled back towards more steady ground, but at the same time keeping an eye out towards where Tahiri had jumped. They hadn't sensed her death, or any of the fear that would accompany a death-plunge from several kilometers up.
Their vigilance paid off when they saw an odd-shaped vessel that appeared to be both yorik coral and metal rise up above the clouds. The blond Jedi was standing on top of it, watching as the city began to collapse around them. "We'll meet again. Think about what I said, you are your own people. Live your life because *you* want to live it, not because someone else has ordered you to live."
Coralskippers and heavy support vessels began to home in on the not-Yuuzhan Vong vessel the Jedi was riding on top of. The blond slipped into her ship, and the hybrid craft rocketed away.
In the meantime, the city continued to disintegrate, and the Slayers rushed to make it to their own personal fighters. The thousands of other Yuuzhan Vong still trapped on the city, and in the sprawling dwellings below, were not as fortunate. As the few vessels and aerial

vehicles managed to get clear of the collapsing rocky archway, the thousands of tons of debris rained down in a cacophonous roar. Many several tens of thousands of lives were wiped out in an instant, buildings were turned into craters, and a massive dust cloud shot into the air as the shaper base was reduced to absolute ruin.

[o-o-[IV]-o-o]

"The great Oz'galathsha Shen'g demands you assist him," a low-ranking Yuuzhan Vong warrior barked at a group of three others in his native tongue.

The three, on guard-duty patrolling the halls of the near-vacant *Emerald Crèche*, looked to the lower ranking warrior with thinly veiled distain. "Who are you to make demands of us?"

"It is not I who makes the demand, but Commander Shen'g himself. If you wish to incur his wrath, continue to guard this empty hallway. It is not my head that will roll for your disobedience."

The three warriors looked at each other nervously. Oz'galathsha's adherence to Shimrra's more extreme measures of discipline was well-known by those who served him. More cautiously, the leader of the trio asked. "And what task does the commander have for us?"

"One of our ships interdicted some smugglers and captured a *Jeedai*," the low-ranking warriorsaid, bowing his head submissively. "Commander Shen'g wants to take no chances and has called for an increase of security. Only warriors skilled in combat will be allowed near the prisoner. He has promised all a reward should we successfully escort the *Jeedai* to Shimrra alive."

"A *Jeedai?"*

"The famed Ganner Rhysode," the warrior said.

The others all straightened, realizing that this wasn't just any Jedi, but one of great renown. And that they had all been chosen by Commander Shen'g to assist in the guarding of such a dangerous foe.

"Then why do you waste our time blathering about like a mindless Shamed One?" The leader growled. "The commander has ordered you to bring us to him, so do so!"

"I obey." The low-ranking warrior quickly led the three through the several corridors it took to reach the docking bay.

They were noticeably empty.

"Commander Shen'g has called on the others guarding this ship as well?" One of the warriors asked gruffly as they approached the door-like membrane that separated the smaller picket-ship from the larger cruiser.

"Yes," the low-ranking warrior nodded. "As the threat is greater closer to the *Jeedai*, Commander Shen'g felt it prudent to move the warriors to where the threat is."
The membrane parted, allowing the warriors to pass. Greeting them on the other side were two other low-ranking warriors, one of whom spoke. "They are waiting for you at the back of the ship."
The leader of the higher-ranking warriors nodded. "Good, then wait here. It is clear Commander Shen'g has no need of your worthless abilities."
The lower-ranking warriors all stepped to the side, glaring at the speaker but unable to do little more due to their station.
The three higher-ranking warriors tromped through the small ship, their expressions set into the most intimidating snarls they could muster. They would show the *Jeedai* Rhysode that they were not afraid, did not believe the rumors the heretical Shamed Ones told of him.
They marched to the back of the ship, stopping just outside the membrane door of the last compartment. "Commander, it is I, Kinshal Shen'g, your loyal subaltern. I bring with you the men you have requested!"
"Enter," barked a deep voice.
The three entered the last compartment in the ship, full of bluster and bravado.
But then blinked, completely stunned by the impossibility of what they were now seeing.
Suspended in the air in the center of the room, rear-end facing the door, was Commander Oz'galathsha Shen'g, trussed up like a holiday fowl….and sans any clothing. At his feet were several dozen Yuuzhan Vong, sprawled out and unconscious.
"What…?" Was all the lead warrior managed to say, before a heavy pipe was brought down on the back of his head.
The other two warriors spun around, only to see a heavy fist fly into their face.
Simultaneously, all three warriors dropped to the ground with their brethren.
"Aaaaand, that makes what, forty-nine?" Ganner said, ruefully rubbing his knuckles. "Ouch, I really hope that was the last of them. They have really hard heads."
"Forty-nine," Zekk confirmed, dragging the three into place. He glanced back towards the doorway at the lower-ranking warriors who had assisted them. "So, were they the last of them?"

"Guarding the immediate hallways and the decks closest to this one, yes," the warrior said via translation from the Freed One pilot. "There are others still spread out throughout the ship."
"Thanks Oz," Ganner smiled cheerfully, patting the scowling Oz'galathsha, spinning the commander around in the process. "You're better than any stun gun. Couldn't have done it without you."
"The warriors are more convinced than ever that you truly are the god of insanity," the Freed One pilot sighed. "I am too."
Mallie and Rahm simply stared at all the unconscious Yuuzhan Vong in complete shock.
"I'm not dreaming, Rahm, the plan actually worked?" Mallie said dumbly.
Rahm could only nod. "Yeah. It did."
Natua set aside her metal pipe and shrugged. "I never had any doubts. In a way, it was kind of fun."
"Ganner, we've corrupted another one," Zekk gestured to Natua. "Kam and Tionne are *really* not going to like us."
Ganner chuckled. "We can apologize when we see them again. Right now, let's get to the bridge and finish off our little scheme."
"These foreign Jedi really move at their own speed, don't they?" Rahm said in mock whisper.
"Yeah," Mallie said faintly. "Ludicrous speed."
"And from what I've seen of Ganner, Zekk, and Natua, they *only* move at that speed. How do they do it?"
"When we find out, we'll let you know," Zekk laughed. "Come on, question our sanity later. We almost have your planet back. Once we do, you can have all the time in the world to wonder about the odd ways of us foreign Jedi."
[o-o-[V]-o-o]
Sannah continued to hold the injured Bothan against her, a small amount of fear pulsating from her as she half-carried Yaqeel through the halls of the *Sentinel* and to the med-bay as fast as she humanly could. Behind her, Doran was supporting a still woozy Bazel, while both Corran and Jysella helped escort a weary-looking Valin. A majority of the ship's medical team was already tending to the three hundred plus prisoners her and Doran's plan had freed, as well as the other surviving strike team members, and the Jedi didn't want to take up their valuable time. Fortunately, there was one healer who hadn't joined in the triage in the hangar bay, and that was who they were headed to now.
"I'm so sorry," Sannah whispered her heart pounding. "If I hadn't thought of that stupid plan. If I…"

"Shhhh…It's okay," Yaqeel managed, her pain numbed with both medicine and the Force. "I'm a Jedi. I knew the risks when I signed up for the mission. Barv did too. All things considered, it could have been a lot worse than just my arm."
The doors to the med-bay slid open. "Master Jusik," Sannah said breathlessly. It had taken some convincing to get the Mandalorianized Jedi to leave the comfort of the Kyrimorut, but the fact that the Kyrimorut had been reduced to ruin by the Yuuzhan Vong had been the deciding factor. No one was going to bombard his home into dust, kill the members of his clan, and get away with it.
The Jedi-healer-turned-Mandalorian evaluated the three wounded Knights, then pointed a finger at Bazel. "Him first."
"But Yaqeel…"
"Only got her arm chopped off, she'll live," Bardan said gruffly. "Head injuries are more serious. If you want to help, give your friend a bacta wrap and use the Force to keep the tissues in her arm from dying, just like I taught you Melodie. I'll reattach it later."
Sannah looked mutinous, but nodded and helped Yaqeel onto one of the medical beds.
"Really, Sannah, I'll be alright," Yaqeel said softly, clutching her severed arm to her. A bacta pack had been attached to the lightsaber-burned end to help keep the tissue viable.
"But you, Barv, and Val," Sannah said, her stomach churning with guilt.
"Hey, the three of us a bit banged up is more than worth the three hundred or so people we rescued," Valin called out from across the room.
"Shush," Jysella said, slapping his stomach. She was busy smearing a liquid-gel bandage over the horizontal burn across the bridge of his nose.
"Are you okay, Barv?" Sannah asked, looking to her Ramoan friend.
"Just a little woozy, but I'm feeling better already." Bazel said in return. He was lying on a bed with Bardan Jusik's hands on either side of his head.
"He has a serious concussion and broken vertebrae," Bardan said dryly, his eyes closed as he focused on healing the young Jedi. "Fortunately, he's a Ramoan, and his people are hardier than an average human. Doubly so since he's Force sensitive. Now, if you don't mind, he needs to enter a healing trance."
"Sorry, Master Jusik," Sannah said, sticking her tongue out at the older Jedi now that she knew her friend would be okay.
Bardan raised a single eyebrow in response. "Really, Jedi Apprentice Sannah?"

Sannah blushed, but exhaled in relief nonetheless. Now that she had time to finally register what they had just done, she felt some sense of pride at having rescued several hundred people who would have ordinarily still be trapped down on the planet. Yaqeel was right, three serious but heal-able injuries in exchange for all those lives seemed more than worth it now.
The door to the room opened, and both Dinua and Jintar entered. Behind them, a dozen of the surviving Mandalorians waited in the hallway.
"Sannah, Doran."
Sannah's grim expression returned. Though the Jedi had survived, several Mandalorians had died. "Dinua."
"Good mission," Dinua said, slapping Sannah on the back as she passed the younger teen on her way to Bardan. "Skirata, when you're done, your clan's on the comm for you."
"Understood."
"Everyone else," Dinua said to the Jedi in the room. "You're being rerouted to Dac after this."
"'You're'?" Doran raised an eyebrow.
"Yes, while everyone's been busy patching themselves up, this ship's met up with a Mandalorian frigate to off-load our people. With the mission done, we have no other reason to remain onboard. You and Sannah are welcome to come with us if you want, *dikut.*"
Doran and Sannah exchanged a glance, then shook their heads in unison. "As fun as it would be, we're still Jedi, Dinua."
The blond-haired woman smirked faintly. "I figured you'd say that. Fortunately for the two of you, both Scout and Kina Ha were on the frigate and are said to be willing to join your Jedi Order for the duration of this war."
"Really?" Doran blinked.
"Yes, really," Dinua held out her hand towards Doran. "Until next time, Doran. *K'oyacyi.*"
"You too," Doran gripped her forearm. "It was a blast."
"Sannah," Dinua moved to repeat the gesture with the younger teen. "You keep that *dikut* alive, you hear me?"
"Naturally," Sannah said. "Until I find someone who can do a better job, of course."
Dinua smirked. "Good luck with that."
Doran, who was shaking Jintar's hand, shook his head. "Jintar, your fiancé's corrupted my girlfriend."
"Wife," Jintar corrected.
"You had a wedding already?" Sannah said with wide-eyes.

"We had Scout officiate it when her ship docked," Dinua shrugged, as if getting married was no big deal.
"I'll *never* understand you Mandalorians," Sannah said, shaking her head in disbelief.
"Congratulations?" Doran added, nodding in agreement with his girlfriend.
"Thanks," Jintar laughed. "I'm going to miss the two of you."
"Thank you for the help," Corran said as the Mandalorians stepped back.
"We were just helping out family," Jintar said, donning his helmet and gesturing to Doran and Sannah. "Family's more than blood after all."
"Yeah," Corran smiled, tilting his head in acknowledgement. "Good luck doing whatever you Mandalorians are going to do next."
"You as well, Jedi," Jintar said. Behind him on the other side of the doorway, the other Mandalorians formed up, and Dinua took her place at his side. "May we all make it out of this war."
"More or less in one piece," Yaqeel chimed in.
"More or less in one piece," Dinua agreed, as everyone nodded solemnly. "Fortunately for us, if things keep going as they are, there isn't much war to fight left. With luck, we'll see you all on Coruscant."
As one, the Mandalorians departed, their heavy boots thumping through the ship's corridor.
"And you're friends with them?" Jysella whispered in shock, eyes round.
"Uh huh," Sannah giggled. "Don't ask me how it happened. Even I don't know!"
Relieved laughter filled the room as the young Jedi were glad to be alive and have such amazing friends and family watching their backs.
[o-o-[VI]-o-o]
Tahiri exhaled as her ship finished entering the hangar of the *Rebel Dream*. "Good job *Veila*. Not bad for your first mission."
Thank you.
Tahiri smiled. "We'll be heading back to Mon Cal next, so get some rest."
I'm a ship, I don't need rest like you non-ship people do.
Tahiri rolled her eyes beneath the cognition hood, definitely recognizing her own perkiness in the *Veila*'s thought-message. There was just something about being able to talk with the *Veila* that helped her to decompress from the high-stakes mission she had just completed. "Fine, go explore the HoloNet, or analyze the recordings of the mission, or play with the grutchin."
What will you be doing?

"Well," Tahiri glanced at the severed Slayer arm in her lap. "I have to deliver this to our scientists. We couldn't pick up a sample of the viruses the shapers were working on, so this will kind of be my apology gift."
What do you think those people were?
"Nothing good, that's for sure," Tahiri sighed. "There are only a few ways the Yuuzhan Vong shapers could have created a soldier that uses the Force, and all those ways involve the bodies or research done on Jedi."
Like what they did to you?
Tahiri grimaced and nodded. "Yeah. It won't surprise me if some of Meezhan Kwaad's research was used for whatever project gave birth to those people. It's kind of why I wanted to give them a chance. They really don't know any better because they've been brought up solely on Shimrra's doctrines."
They're still your enemy.
"They're still living, breathing beings brought into this world through no fault of their own," Tahiri corrected gently. Despite being a super-intelligent ship, the *Veila* was still learning and was still fairly innocent when it came to matters such as right and wrong. "I could have been one of those people. Forgiveness, understanding, those are the ways of a Jedi."
But I'm a ship. The *Veila* almost whined, as if the concepts Tahiri was talking about was confusing for her.
"You're my friend," Tahiri giggled, reclining in her seat and patting the living walls fondly. "And if you're going to be a friend of Jedi, you can't just go blasting everyone who disagrees with you."
Okay, I guess so...Tahiri, I am receiving a communications from Jaina Solo. Patching her through.
"*Tahiri, you okay in there?*"
"Yeah, Jaina," Tahiri said brightly. "I was just talking with *Veila* and explaining to her what it means to be a Jedi."
"Of course you were," Jaina's reply was dry as her concern bled away. *"Come on out. Colonel Dorja said you managed to procure some samples for the intel people?"*
Tahiri held up the arm in her lap as she removed the cognition hood with her other hand. "A sample. Probably not what they were expecting though. Did Sannah and the others pull their mission off?"
"Yeah, but with a lot of injured and several dead."
"None of the other Knights?" Tahiri said quickly.
"The worst I've heard is that Yaqeel is having her arm reattached. They ran into those same Force-using shaped soldiers that we did."

"Well at least they made it out alive."
Tahiri reached the ramp of the ship and it lowered of its own accord. Giving the coralline bulkhead one last fond pat, Tahiri stepped out of her ship and into the busy hangar bay. Waiting for her was Vana, Zindra, Tekli, and Jaina.
"Hey, sorry for the wait," Tahiri said perkily, waving the severed arm. "Here, Colonel. This is for you."
Vana looked blankly at the arm. "And this is?"
"The arm of the Force-sensitive, shaped warrior that wanted to kill me," Tahiri said, beaming. "You can give that to whatever scientists we have so they can figure out just what they were."
Vana continued to stare blankly at Tahiri. "A severed arm?"
"Uh huh," Tahiri said, while Zindra, Tekli, and Jaina started to chuckle. "I thought I'd give you guys a hand with your studies."
"Be happy it didn't cost the other guy an arm *and* a leg," Jaina added.
"We Jedi do try to reach out to others," Tekli said with a wise nod, before they all broke out laughing again.
Vana very reluctantly took the arm and began to walk away, shaking her head as she did. As she did, the others could hear her murmur repeatedly. *"I'm definitely taking that transfer. I'm definitely taking that transfer. These Jedi are insane!"*
Zindra laughed aloud, her body shaking with mirth. "Wow, leave it to Jedi to make me agree with an Imperial. Dad will never believe it."
"Ready for our customary glass of ice cold blue milk?" Tahiri asked the pilot with a cheerful grin.
"Yup. The rest of the Barefoots are already in the lounge waiting for you, Lead." Zindra tilted her head playful and jerked a thumb to Jaina. "We even invited Twin Suns to join us."
"And I kind of invited myself along," Tekli said.
"The more the merrier," Tahiri smiled, offering an elbow to each. "Come on, let's go. Before some senior Jedi or officer comes along and gives us some equally ridiculous mission like this one."
"Dropping a city on a city," Jaina nodded in agreement as they began walking. "That's one for the record books."
"And those giant voxyn," Tekli shuddered. "Never have I felt closer to a chew-toy than at that moment."
"All I remember is running for my life and wishing I hadn't signed up," Zindra said dryly.
"Oh right, there's that too," Jaina said, as if she just recalled that particular part of the mission. "You kind of get used to it after a while, so it becomes one big blur."
"That is true, isn't it?" Tekli agreed, looking pensive.

"And you're supposed to be a Jedi Healer, aren't you?" Zindra cocked her head at the Chadra Fan. "What's a healer doing taking on crazy covert missions?"
"Dropping a city on a city isn't exactly covert," Tekli pointed out.
"You know what I mean."
Tekli motioned to Jaina and Tahiri. "Someone has to keep these insane asylum escapees in one piece. If I don't go with them on these dangerous missions, they're liable to come back missing an organ or two."
The doors to the lounge opened and the members of both Twin Suns and Barefoot Squadron all raised their glasses in salute.
Jaina beamed at her friends and squadmates. "And this is why I love my job."
[o-o-[VII]-o-o]
"Repairs to my link to the hyperdrive are complete."
Both Jacen and Anakin looked over as Sekot approached them in the form of their grandfather.
"That's good, right?" Anakin said.
"It is," Sekot shifted to become a mirror image of the Ferroan magister. "I will be emerging into real space shortly, and from there we can change course and head to your Coruscant."
The brothers exchanged glances, seemingly steeling themselves for what was to come. "That's great, Sekot."
"Your tone suggests otherwise," Sekot tilted her head. As she sat down, she became the little Ferroan girl Triscia. "Why?"
"In some ways, we can't help but feel guilty about dragging you further into this war," Jacen replied with an apologetic shrug of his shoulders. "In other ways, we can't really believe this war is going to end after all these years of fighting," Anakin added. "I mean, both Jacen and I spent a good portion of our teenage years running around, trying to avoid the Yuuzhan Vong and the seemingly overwhelming odds that were against us. And now, now we're on a sentient planet about to head to the Yuuzhan Vong capital, all in the hopes of ending a four year war. It still takes some getting used to."
"Look at it from the Yuuzhan Vong point of view," Ahsi-Sekot commented. "Both the ones who call themselves free, and those who still serve this Shimrra. The ones who are free see me as their long-lost home, a place they can belong after centuries of warfare and suffering. In comparison, your four years of war would be like just another day for most of them. All they have known is warfare, death, of belonging to nowhere yet needing a place to belong. And now that they have it, many are scared for the future. Scared, but hopeful as well."

"You'll be good for them, Sekot," Jacen said.
"And they for me," Ahsi-Sekot nodded in agreement. "Never before have I felt such a sense of completion. If I were a Jedi, and the Yuuzhan Vong could truly be felt in the Force, I would say that it was the Force that brought us together."
"What about the Yuuzhan Vong who follow Shimrra?" Anakin tilted his head curiously.
Ahsi-Sekot smiled faintly and gazed out at the Yuuzhan Vong structures being set up in the valley below. "They are even more scared than those who see themselves as free. To them, I represent an impossibility. The home of their gods. I represent a final judgment for their actions. A change many are nowhere near ready for due to their beliefs. In some part of their hearts, they know that they must abandon their current cycles of death and destruction. Yet, they continue to ignore this part in favor for what they are accustomed to, what they have been taught since they were children. My arrival will be akin to a parent's scolding, especially when the child knows that they have done wrong. They will kick, and scream, and protest their innocence, all the while knowing that change must occur if they are to continue living. Not all will be brave enough, strong enough, to embrace the change I represent. The change the people of this galaxy have brought to them. Of these, many will most likely take their own lives rather than see all that they know collapse around them. The few who choose not to will remain forever embittered as those around them grow happy. These will be ones who will cause trouble in the future, will be the challenge that all others must overcome as they learn their new place in this galaxy. And for the rest of Shimrra's followers, they will become like those who call themselves free. They will cease to be followers and merely become Yuuzhan Vong. They will become the backbone for the new society, those who had the strength to change even when it meant abandoning all they were fighting for."
"It almost sounds as if you're predicting the future," Jacen noted with raised eyebrows.
"Possibly," Sekot said enigmatically, taking on the form of Vergere.
"But is it possible to predict the future of the Yuuzhan Vong, they who remain outside of the Force?"
"It all depends on your point of view," Anakin answered. "You and Tahiri managed to heal the Yuuzhan Vong infected with the virus through the Force, or at least a Vongsense enhanced version of it. To those who can't use Vongsense, and have never met Jacen, Tahiri, or myself, the YuuzhanVong are definitely outside of the Force and can't be seen by it. To those who can't use Vongsense but know Jacen,

Tahiri, or myself, the Yuuzhan Vong might be outside the Force and it might not. As far as they are concerned, they know it's possible to sense the Yuuzhan Vong, but at the same time know that they themselves are incapable of doing so."
"And what of yourself, your brother, or Tahiri? "Vergere-Sekot asked.
"I'd like to think that it was possible to see the Yuuzhan Vong's future through the Force," Anakin shrugged. "It's far beyond what I'm capable of, but if it's definitely within the realm of possibility. Jace?"
Jacen was silent for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. It's possible that the Force can be used to see the future of the Yuuzhan Vong, just not the Force as we know it. There's so much about the Force that we aren't aware of, so much about the Force that exists outside of the teachings we were brought up on. It's impossible to understand it all. But, if at the very least we can make an effort to understand just a fraction of it, we'll be able to understand more of this galaxy as a whole. The Force is supposed to flow through everything after all."
"And the billion credit question of the day," Anakin glanced over at Sekot and his brother. "If you know that something's going to cause a problem in the future, do you let it happen or try to prevent it not knowing what other consequences your actions can have? Do we let these disillusioned and disgruntled Yuuzhan Vong disrupt the Supreme Council or whatever it will become, or do we lock them up?"
"A good question indeed," Vergere-Sekot chortled. "But it is not such a hard question, young Jedi. Ultimately, it's not up to us, is it? How will the Supreme Council grow if not through adversity? A bird cannot fly without first flapping its wings, cannot flap their wings without first stretching them wide. If we simply take a bird that has never flown high into the air and release them, they will not fly, but fall. Too much help can be hurtful, just as a little difficulty can be beneficial in the end."
"A necessary evil?" Jacen cocked his head to the side.
"Indeed," Vergere-Sekot's head bobbed up and down much like her real-life counterpart. "Will they not be stronger when kept on their guard? Will they not more carefully plan their decisions if they are protested vehemently? There is the difference between knowing the future and trying to control it. What happens, will happen, regardless of our actions. It is how we respond to those events when they come that becomes the deciding factor. Of course, that is just my opinion."
"You do not see a need for Jedi to stay on Zonama Sekot?" Anakin asked.
"I did not say that." Sekot blurred and once again became the Ferroan magister. "The Jedi will be essential in the coming years as guides and

peacekeepers, just like they have always been for the rest of the galaxy. But there will come a time when the best guidance you can give is letting the Yuuzhan Vong make their own mistakes, take control of their own lives without any input from you. To use another metaphor, the Yuuzhan Vong are like toddlers right now, but they will grow quicker than you expect, and act upon your example. Hold their hands too long, however, and they will resent you. Ferroan, Jedi, whoever else stays to help the Yuuzhan Vong, the years after the war will be full of challenges unlike many we have experienced. They will be long years, but interesting and rewarding in the end for us all."
Sekot paused as she considered her words, and offered the two Jedi a wry smile. "And as a planet, saying something will be challenging is no laughing matter."
"It's not too late to stick with the rest of us, Anakin," Jacen said, chuckling softly.
Anakin took in a deep breath, watching the blue glow of hyperspace above. "Nah, I think I'm going to like the challenge. Have to do something after this war other than kiss Tahiri and play peacekeeper. You sure *you* don't want to stick around? This planet's like your dream-world. Full of all sorts of critters, especially once we begin transplanting all that Yuuzhan Vong life over."
Jacen looked down at the valley and distant tampasii. There was no denying that he wasn't tempted, that the idea of finally settling down and just playing Jedi game warden after years of constant conflict, didn't have a certain appeal. But then the real Vergere's words echoed in his mind, reminding him of the duty he had to the galaxy, to the destiny that was supposedly in store for him. He let a handful of dirt run through his hands and blow away with the constant breeze whipping across the surface of the planet.
"Nah." He mimicked his younger brother. "You may still be sure of your beliefs, of your place in this galaxy. I'm still finding mine."
"Being on the High Council isn't enough?"
"It's a start," Jacen said before he could stop himself. "I mean, when you're on the highest decision making body in the galaxy, there isn't much room for advancement. At least in the political realm. Not unless I become Chief of State or something silly like that. I have much to learn about the Force, all those little corners of this galaxy to explore. In a way, I'm fortunate in that the galaxy currently hates you and not me."
"Glad I could help your travel plans," Anakin laughed, shaking his head.

"Yeah," Jacen grinned. "It's not time for me to settle down yet. I guess I'm like you, Sekot. I have more questions about the Force than answers. I always seem to have questions, even after finding answers."
"Your quest for knowledge is most intriguing," Ahsi-Sekot said, squatting down next to him. "Will you know when you've found what you were looking for? Or will your quest be never-ending?"
"Tenel Ka will probably be very angry with you if it's never-ending," Anakin chimed in.
"It'll only be for a few years," Jacen said lightly. "If I'm going to be one of the highest ranking Jedi, I need to better understand the Force and how others view it to be any good. Being a leader is one thing, but I think the promotion was a little premature."
"Good luck with that," Anakin said sincerely.
"Thanks," Jacen chuckled. "Good luck building up the Yuuzhan Vong. Comparatively, I think I have the easier job."
"Always were the lucky one, Jace," Anakin remarked.
"I think the entire family is lucky," Jacen reached out to ruffle his brother's hair. "We still have each other, and our friends."
"When you think about it, after surviving an intergalactic war with your friends and family, anything else that'll come next just doesn't seem that exciting," Anakin said with a small frown.
Jacen rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, Anakin. I'm sure they'll be more than enough adventures for us in the future. We're Solos after all. Mystic Jedi business and galactic wars are our specialty."
[o-o-[VIII]-o-o]
After the hair-raising adventure, Jaina was in need of a break. Unfortunately, her preferred break-partner was currently half a galaxy away busy trying to keep his government from collapsing in on itself. Fortunately, her 'little sister' was likewise alone, her boyfriend also on the other side of the galaxy trying to do mystic Jedi business with a living planet.
Unfortunately, the need for a break came on the heels of Intelligence reports that reported a massive Yuuzhan Vong armada on the move. It was much greater than originally anticipated and elements of the Corellian taskforce had been reassigned to help Mon Calamari hold out. The tension in the air had been thick, with the remaining days filled with drills and more drills.
The only bright side was that the attack wouldn't be for another three days at the earliest.
In some ways, it was strange knowing that the battles they were about to fight would essentially end the four year war, that the battles would probably be the largest and most important in their young lives. In

other ways, it was just another battle, business as usual, another fight against impossible odds. That's not to say the fight against impossible odds wasn't stressful in any way.
The older Jedi had seen the tension in not just Tahiri and Jaina's shoulders, but in their other younger charges, promptly gave everyone a day's worth of leave.
Bundled up in comfy parkas and reclined on two beach chairs, pushed together to give the both of them more room, were both Tahiri and Jaina. They were on a balcony of a private hotel—carved out of the ice on a giant ice floe by Crystal Reef—with nothing but glittering black-hued water all around them. The inky night's sky glimmered with the myriad of stars, the single moon full and bright shining off the darkened water in distorted reflection.
"It definitely feels like things are coming to a head, doesn't it?" Jaina whispered softly, the sound of the waves washing against the ice cap oddly soothing. If they listened hard enough, they could hear the soft call and echolocation-clicks of several ocean-going creatures passing in the distance.
"Yeah," Tahiri said in a small voice. "Is it wrong to be more scared of what comes after? I mean, we're going to win this war, I know that. But what then? What's going to keep this galaxy together when they no longer have the Yuuzhan Vong to hate, to blame for all their troubles? Will they even let the remaining Yuuzhan Vong live in peace?"
"The Yuuzhan Vong have definitely suffered enough," Jaina agreed softly. "If anything, I'll do my damnedest to ensure that you and Anakin and the Yuuzhan Vong have the peace you guys deserve. The war may be ending, but I'm still the Sword of the Jedi. It's my duty to keep everyone safe and happy."
"What about you and Jag?" Tahiri said, her head leaning to the side to rest on Jaina's shoulder. "Any happiness there?"
Jaina's expression was bittersweet as she stared up at the stars. "I guess that's up to the Force, isn't it? We're both attached to our duties, can't abandon them even if it means we remain miserable and lonely for the rest of our lives."
"That's just stupid," Tahiri said, looking at Jaina almost petulantly. "There's no reason you can't be happy too. Even Jacen's somehow clued into his feelings for a certain red-haired Queen Mother. You're the most passionate of the three Solos, that's your greatest strength. Duty or no, when this war is over, you better find someone to keep you happy, something other than slaying bad guys to pass your time. And that someone better be a brooding Clawcraft pilot who's probably become some type of Chiss general by now."

Jaina squirmed as Tahiri poked her in the arm with every sentence, finally emitting a small laugh. "Alright! Alright! When this war is over, I'll see what I can do about becoming some type of Jedi-Diplomat to the Ascendancy, or something like that. I'll invent my own post if I have to."
"Good," Tahiri's head bobbed once. "If Anakin and I are going to maroon ourselves on Zonama and live happily ever after, you and Jacen better have your own fairytale endings too."
Jaina chuckled, draping an arm around the smaller blond teen. "I just thought of something utterly ridiculous."
"Huh?"
"Well, you and Anakin are going to be the unofficial leaders and guides of the Yuuzhan Vong for a pretty long time. Jace and Tenel Ka, when they finally get together to produce a couple of heirs, are going to have Hapes and the Galactic Alliance locked down. And if anything does happen between me and Jag, we'll probably have the Chiss and Imperials under our belts. Between the six of us, we'll pretty much be ruling this galaxy before the decade's out."
Tahiri smiled. "That sounds fun."
"It'll be a lot of work."
"Someone has to fix this galaxy up," Tahiri shrugged. "As long as I have Anakin and the rest of you at my side, it doesn't seem like too big a challenge."
Jaina just sighed and rubbed Tahiri's shoulder affectionately. "I'm definitely going to miss you and Anakin. I mean, I understand why the two of you are exiling yourself to Zonama Sekot, but I don't like it one bit. Jace doesn't either and it's driving him up the wall. It's more than rare that we run into a problem we can't solve."
"It won't be that bad," Tahiri said. "And you and Jacen can always visit us. It's not like Zonama Sekot is going to severe *all* contact with this galaxy."
"I know, I know," Jaina said, her own head leaning to the side to rest itself against Tahiri's. "And for you and Anakin, living together on a sentient planet so strong in the Force will probably be like some dream come true. But recently, when I imagined what I would do with the war over, I had always pictured the two of you with the rest of us Solos. It just…doesn't seem right that even with the war over our family will still be split up."
Tahiri made a small sound as she gripped Jaina's hand, her eyes fluttering close.
"Tahiri?"
"It's not quite official yet," Tahiri said, her face flushed.

Jaina continued to just rub Tahiri's arm. "You'll always be a Solo even if it takes my brother another decade or two to make it official."
"Please," Tahiri laughed, unable to stop the glowy warm feeling in her chest caused by the idea of being 'officially' part of the Solo family. She had a silly grin on her face as she basked in her bond with Jaina. It was kind of fun, having an older sister. "Knowing Anakin, he'll propose to me as we're assaulting Shimrra's citadel, or as everything is going to pieces around us. He may be good at improvising his plans, but he has the *worst* timing of the three of you. Is there something about me that says that I'm the type of girl who enjoys being kissed and having highly romantic moments whenever I'm in a life-or-death situation?"
"I can't say," Jaina said, grinning. "I know *I'm* the type of girl who'll always be in those life-or-death situations, more so if I'm with Jag. There's just something about us Solos and danger that seem to go hand in hand."
"What about Jacen?"
"My twin? He's the guy in love with a girl who has to survive at least two assassination attempts a day."
"Good point," Tahiri giggled.
Jaina sobered slightly, giving Tahiri a one-armed hug. "But you and Anakin be happy after this war is over, okay? I mean it. Take care of each other and don't let anything mess up what you have. I just…I just want the two of you to have a family of your own, to not worry about anything going on in the rest of the galaxy. The two of you have more than done your fair share, leave it to me and the others to continue fixing this galaxy up."
Tahiri nodded, closing her eyes as she envisioned having that family Jaina wanted her and Anakin to have, the family *she* wanted to have. The warm feeling in her chest coursed all the way down to her toes at the thought of it. "We will be, Jaina. I love him so much. He makes me stronger, gives me the confidence and courage to do all the crazy things I've done. I don't need much to be happy so long as I have him. I love him I don't know how to describe it. Do you feel the same way about Jag?"
"Not as strongly," Jaina said softly. "Jag and I have never had the time to get that close, don't have that Force bond to help us along."
"But do you want that with him?" Tahiri looked up again.
Jaina nodded mutely, allowing her own armored heart to admit what she normally tried to bury away. Tahiri just had that effect on her. No matter how she tried to keep everyone at bay, how protective of her heart she was, Tahiri found a way through those defenses with ease. And Jaina was glad that the younger teen was capable of doing so.

Jaina would much rather be a living, feeling being, than a mindless, one-tracked Sword of the Jedi smiting all the wrongdoers. That didn't mean she'd voice her feelings aloud though.
"You'll have it," Tahiri said definitively. "I just know it. You and Jag. Jacen and Tenel Ka. Me and Anakin. And just like that fun vision of yours, we'll pull this galaxy together and show it that no one can mess with us."
Jaina closed her eyes and breathed in the cool sea air. "You're an amazing little sister, you know that?"
"Thanks," Tahiri chirped, making herself comfortable against Jaina. The sound of the waves and the warmth of Jaina's taller form lulling her to sleep. "You're a pretty great big sister yourself."
Jaina just made a noise of agreement as she settled against the smaller Jedi. The day's break had been a much needed relief, and the stiffness of her muscles dissipated as she too drifted off to a comfortable sleep filled with dreams of a happier and brighter future.
[o-o-[IX]-o-o]
"What can you do for us in return? Hmmm…let's see. How about a statue of me, robes of solid gold, and a holiday named after me," Ganner smiled at the holocams, before receiving punches in the arm from both Natua and Zekk. "What? We just saved their planet, is that too much to ask? I mean, I saved a planet last time, and all I got was a line in the ground named after me. I have to do things right this time"
"Ganner!" Zekk said, shaking his head.
"Fine, include these two in the statue too."
"Jedi Rhysode," Natua scowled.
"Fine, no statue."
"Or robes of gold," Zekk said.
"Or holiday. You're already a god, what more could you want?" Natua added, then quickly shook her head. "Wait, don't answer that."
Ganner looked heartbroken at the cameras. "I guess all I can accept is your goodwill and thanks. Us Jedi live are supposed to live frugally and modestly after all."
Off to the side, Rahm leaned towards his sister. "Are they Jedi team or a comedy troupe?"
"It's a good thing they're finally leaving," Mallie nodded.
"In all seriousness, though," Ganner straightened and flashed a winning smile at the hover-cams floating all around, and the crowd of several thousand filling the bombed-out and charred streets around the stage. "Just continue to be the good people you all are and remember what you accomplished here these past few months. Us Jedi can only do so much, our efforts will only go so far. We're mainly

around to give you that leg-up, or the kick-in-the-pants for some, but we can't do it all. United, your future is in your hands. It is up to the rest of you to continue what has been started today. Working side by side with each other, all of you have it within yourselves to bring Corulag into the future. A new day has dawned on this planet, a new chapter poised to be written, and it is thanks not to us Jedi, but the brave acts of all of you, that it is possible. So thank *you* for supporting our own efforts, and may the Force be with you all."
The crowd cheered as Ganner and the others bowed respectfully. The Jedi rose from their bow, waving to the crowd and walking off the stage to an uplifting score being broadcasted from speakers spread throughout the city. The fight for Corulag had been embarrassingly quick compared to the months that had gone into its planning. The Yuuzhan Vong garrison, now detained and awaiting transport off planet, still had no idea what had happened, and they had had a week to processes the events.
"Good speech," Galen said, holding out a hand to Ganner.
"Thanks."
"We've sent word through some of Juno's intel contacts that this planet is secure. A Hapan fleet is swinging by to pick you and the others up and bring you back to Dac."
"I was just beginning to like this place," Ganner sighed, rubbing the back of his neck as the planet's newly elected president began elaborating on his future plans for the planet in the background. "You sure you can take everything from here?"
"We'll manage," Galen nodded. "You certainly helped set it up that way."
"No problems with the organized crime families?" Natua asked.
Mallie shook her head. "Surprisingly, they're actually helping keep this new government stable. I'm not sure how long it will last, but they stepped into the power vacuum before the actual criminals could."
"Of course, they have a couple members of their family now on the Corulag Senate, so things should definitely become interesting as we rebuild," Rahm added.
Galen's comlink beeped, and the older Jedi answered it. "Go ahead, Juno."
"The Hapans have arrived, and it looks like most of them will be staying for a short-term basis."
"Really?"
"With Corulag in our hands, and the Yuuzhan Vong none-the-wiser, Galactic Alliance Fleet Command will be using this planet as a staging ground for an attack on Coruscant. The space above Corulag is going

to get real crowded, real quick. In the meantime, a Dukat Gray is requesting to speak to the Jedi in charge."
Galen blinked, looked at the younger Jedi, and then held the comlink out to Ganner. "Here you go."
"Huh?"
"You're in charge."
"I thought you were."
"I was, and my last act was to put you in charge, Jedi Rhysode. Now I'm retired. I'm getting too old for politics and planet-saving anyways."
Ganner stared at the comlink as if it were an amphistaff head. Slowly he took it, then promptly handed it over to Mallie. "Here, now you're in charge."
Mallie's head whipped up in surprise. "What?"
"Zekk, Natua, and I need to be going. It's your planet anyways."
"Father!" Mallie looked to Galen, who was already walking away with his hands in his pocket. She whirled around to her brother, who promptly put several steps of distance between them.
"You're the oldest, Mal."
Scowling at Ganner and the others, Mallie snatched the comlink from his hands with authority. "Fine. Mom, this is Mallie, put the Dukat through."
"What happen to your father?"
"He retired," Mallie said waspishly.
"*And Jedi Rhysode?"*
"He did the usual thing of handing all the responsibility to me and Rahm."
"Just you!" Rahm corrected.
Mallie glared at her brother. "Of handing all the responsibility to me."
There was a deep sigh on the other end of the line. "*Well, if you're the Jedi in charge, I guess you're the Jedi in charge. Connecting you to the Dukat now."*
As Mallie began coordinating relief efforts with the Dukat, Ganner, Zekk, and Natua began to walk away from the crowded plaza.
"We didn't do too bad," Zekk commented mildly, gazing about the rain-soaked grey buildings that surrounded them.
"Not bad at all," Ganner said, slinging an arm around Natua. "What say you, Green Girl?
Natua removed his arm, but nodded approvingly. "It could have been a lot worse. I take it this is an average adventure for you?"
"More or less," Zekk nodded. "Insane bad guys, improbable plans that somehow work, and big celebrations in the end."

"The high life," Ganner said brightly. A Hapan shuttle descended through the white fluffy clouds in their direction. "Planet freed, Vong foiled, and the nice warm rays of the sun shining down on us. Can't get any better than that."
Natua smiled faintly. "Indeed. I wonder how all the others have fared during our adventures. It is nearly impossible for us to *all* have had some type of high-risk, life-threatening adventure. "
Ganner and Zekk looked at each other dubiously. "You want to place a bet on that?"
Natua hesitated. "Then again, these are our friends we are talking about."
"Exactly," Ganner laughed. The shuttle landed in an empty lot close by, its name—the *Ruby Stomper*—visible for a second before the hatch opened. "Well, our ride awaits."
"It's going to be nice to finally see the others again," Zekk said. "I'm not sure if it's just me, but even if I don't have a place to call my own, whenever I'm with all the others I feel like I'm home."
"It is not just you, Jedi Zekk." Natua nodded sagely, the heels of her boots clicking thrice as she stepped onto the metal boarding ramp. "There's no place like home after all."
[o-o-[Chapter End]-o-o]
A\N: Hope the double update was okay. Please leave a review if you're inclined too =). This ends the Cato Neimoidia/Lorodan arcs, a brief one-chapter adventure involving everyone's favorite Executor and the Slayers is coming up Saturday. And then we begin the final battle with an all-out siege on Mon Cal on Sunday. Almost done!

ADA 64

Sixty-Four
[o-o-[I]-o-o]
"Now, we shall do things my way," Nom Anor glared at the surviving Slayers. They were all on an infidel cargo ship supplied by the remnants of the Peace Brigade, about to land in the spaceport of the planet of Mon Calamari. It wasn't his first destination of choice, but at the moment, choice was something he no longer had. The Slayers had survived in greater number than he had wanted and forced him to continue the mission he had been assigned. That wasn't to say, though, that he would tolerate their continued command over him. "If you had only listened to me and waited for the appropriate time, we would have been able to kill both the target *Jeedai* with ease. Instead,

your foolishness had the garrisons empty, your thirst for blood spooked the *Jeedai* and alerted them that we were aware of their presence. I think up plans for a reason, Shimrra sent you with me for a purpose. And because you failed to heed my advice, you failed him."
The leader of the group of Slayers, one with a amphistaff bite on his cheek, snarled and punched a fist through a flimsy metal locker. "*You* were the one who set the trap."
"And *you* triggered it too early," Nom Anor spat back. "You failed Shimrra. Failed the gods. Failed your purpose. All because you knew nothing of restraint. Knew not the intricacies that go into trapping *Jeedai*. When we arrive on Mon Calamari, you *will* listen to me. You *will* accept my orders as if they were Shimrra's. Only then will you have fulfilled your purpose. Only then will our targets be slain."
The Slayer snarled, leaning forwards so that his spittle flew out onto Nom Anor. "We are no droid! We are Slayers of Shimrra and…"
"You are ignorant children," Nom Anor said, flicking a finger and impaling the Slayer in the shoulder with a specialized blade coated in neurotoxins. It wouldn't kill, but it would remind the Slayer who was in charge by temporarily breaking down some of the enzymes that gave the Slayer its rapid healing and causing great pain in the process. The Slayer collapsed to the ground, gripping at his head and howling in pain. "And I am the Executor of Shimrra."
The other Slayers shifted, and Nom Anor glared at them. "You wish to fulfill the purpose you were born for, don't you? To slay the *Jeedai*? The enemies of Shimrra?"
The Slayers looked uneasy, but they all nodded.
Nom Anor stepped onto and over the Slayer writhing on the ground in pain. "Then listen closely. I know how these *Jeedai*, and the infidels they work with, act before major battles. As we will be arriving a few days before the fleets of Nas Choka, we will be arriving at the height of their preparation. Stealth is key. The specialized ooglith masquer provided to me will allow the *Jeedai* to sense me in their 'Force,' so I will be able to move about as freely as you. Our main goals will be the barracks where the squadrons Twin Suns and Barefoot reside in. The moment we arrive, the *Jeedai* will sense something amiss in their 'Force,' and will investigate. That is our chance to strike. Reign in your baser instincts for just that length of time, and you will have successfully fulfilled your purpose."
"And what after, Executor?" One of the other Slayers asked.
"'After'?" Nom Anor repeated incredulously.
"After we have fulfilled our purpose," a second Slayer nodded. "When the *Jeedai* have been slain, what next?"

Nom Anor stared at the Slayers in disbelief. They were supposed to be mindless drones, akin to the foolish warriors that swelled the ranks of the Yuuzhan Vong. "Afterwards, you shall do as much damage as possible by killing and destroying everything in your path. That is what the explosives supplied to us by our Peace Brigade allies are for. When you finally fall in battle, you shall be raised up to the gods and rewarded in the afterlife."

"Then today is the last day of our lives?" A third Slayer said, straightening.

"Yes," Nom Anor said smoothly. "Whether this plan succeeds or fails, today is the last day you shall ever see."

"And what of you, Executor?"

Nom Anor bowed his head lowly. "I am like you. Should Shimrra and the gods deem I die today, than die I shall. I shall merely do whatever the powers greater than me bid me to do."

The Slayers seemed to all agree with his statement. "Then we shall die today in the name of the Yun'o."

"For that is our fate, and the only fate that was ever in store for us," Nom Anor said. "You have done well to understand that. May the gods watch over you as you strike down the *Jeedai*."

The Slayers all let out a defiant yell, and then began pulling on the heavy gear that would disguise them. They were supposed to be shipyard workers and mechanics, fleeing from a warzone and hoping to land a job at one of the many hangars that dotted the ocean planet. Whether the disguise held up was one thing. But for Nom Anor, again he was provided with the perfect opportunity to escape.

And this time, for good.

With his specialized ooglith masquer he could quite literally disappear among the countless throngs of people. If there was one thing he was good at besides scheming, it was surviving at all costs. And he would survive, somehow, no matter how the war ended. In the end, Nom Anor knew that he had only himself to look out for. That his decisions had led him to this planet far from the Core of the galaxy. Now his life was truly measured by a single day.

Would he survive this latest mission?

The ramp to the ship lowered and Nom Anor smiled grimly.

Only time would tell.

[o-o-[II]-o-o]

With the knowledge that a massive Yuuzhan Vong fleet was only days away, drills and preparations for a planetary assault were in full swing. The task of defending Mon Calamari was made all the more difficult by the fact that the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances had stationed

only a fraction of their available forces within the system. A sizable fraction, but a fraction nonetheless.
They would have to hold the planet at all costs against pretty much everything Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong could throw at them, until the signal was given that Zonama Sekot had re-emerged. The remaining Galactic Alliance fleets were all stationed at staging grounds throughout the galaxy, preparing for an immediate assault on Coruscant. Though most Jedi didn't like to believe in luck, everyone would need a whole lot of it for things to end on a positive note.
If the defenders of Mon Calamari were overwhelmed before Zonama Sekot could emerged, or if the planet was destroyed before Galactic Alliance reinforcements could go to its aid, all was lost. On the flip side, if things worked out, the war would end in their favor. It was a winner-take-all gamble that neither side could afford to lose.
"All right people," Colonel Jaina Solo, Sword of the Jedi, and Twin Suns Leader said into her comm. "I think we've got the maneuvers down. Head back to base and take the rest of the day off."
"You're the best, Lead."
"Remember that, Vale," Jaina smirked, piloting her X-wing back towards the planetary hangar their squadron was based out of. As the squadron made a fly by, the sun was just beginning to dip into the ocean, throwing up all sorts of vibrant colors into the sky. "We'll make it through this war yet, Twin Suns."
She received a series of comlink clicks in agreement and could only smile. Her conversation with Tahiri during their brief leave period was still fresh on her mind, and Jaina had to admit that she was certainly looking forward to the war's end and whatever came after.
The X-wings touched down in the hangar, and the pilots disembarked as techs moved in to service them. Jaina undid her flight helmet, tucking it under her arm as she one-hopped herself out of her fighter and to the duracrete below. Handing off her helmet to the nearest tech, she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.
The smells of oil and grease mingled with the faint salty, ocean air, while the sounds of the work crews filled the hangar.
"See you later, Colonel," Vale waved.
Jaina opened her eyes to wave back at her wingman. "You too, Vale. Going to enjoy your evening?"
"If by enjoy, you mean try to better my score on the simulators, yes," Vale said with a shake of her head. "With something as big as the battle for this planet, I'm definitely going to need all the help I can get. You sure you don't want another wingman?"

"You're a fine pilot, Vale," Jaina smiled. "And you've definitely grown since you've become a Twin Suns. I trust you."
"Thanks," the Neimoidian bowed her head. "See you tomorrow."
As the rest of the squadron disembarked and began to make their way out of the hangar, Jaina greeted her pilots by name, a broad smile on her face as she wished them all the best. She thoroughly blamed her positive outlook and her ability to bond with her squad on both Anakin and Tahiri. Not that it was a bad thing. Even the impending battle against all odds couldn't dampen her feelings for her second family, the pilots of Twin Suns. Whether it was Tahiri getting her to appreciate the bonds she did have, or Anakin's philosophy of taking things one day at a time, Jaina wasn't nearly as closed off and droid-like as she had been two years ago at Myrkr and Hapes.
Opposite of their rather drab, grey hangar, was an equally boring-looking military building, the home of the Barefoots. Their orange and purple, or desert-toned, X-wings provided a nice bit of contrast to the utilitarian military structures that dotted the base as they cruised down the runway and towards their hangar.
Jaina waved at Tahiri's X-wing, and felt Tahiri use the Force to greet her in return. In no time at all, the petite blond teen had hopped out of her X-wing and jogged across the runway.
"Hey!"
"Hey, how are the Barefoots looking?"
"As ready as we can get," Tahiri shrugged. "The newer members are all eager for that big battle that will end this war. The older ones, not so much. Zindra's treating them all to dinner."
"You're not going with?"
Tahiri shook her head as they began to walk towards the perimeter of the base, towards a promenade that overlooked the ocean. "The squadron's pretty much hers now. I'm just that token Jedi, there to boost morale and teach them all about the evils of shoes. Plus, even though its Barefoot squadron, it just isn't the same as the first one. I mean, half the squadron is new. And though they're nice and everything, I can tell my Vongness kind of makes them nervous. I guess, after two years, I just don't really want to put up with it anymore. I can teach a group of people that the Yuuzhan Vong aren't completely bad, but there'll always be a 'someone else' who'll come along with the same closed-mindedness. I'm Jedi patient, but I'm not *that* patient, if you know what I mean."
"Looking forward to joining Anakin on Zonama Sekot?"

"Definitely," Tahiri nodded fervently. "At least there the stares I get will be worshipful and not hateful or weird. At least the Yuuzhan Vong appreciate my attempts to help them."
"Maybe after the battle, people's opinions of them will begin to change," Jaina said hopefully. Her mind went into the mind-boggling logistics that had already gone into the defense of the planet. Not just militarily, but politically as well.
The Freed Yuuzhan Vong were going to play a big role in defending Mon Calamari during the attack. In fact, nearly all of their ships had been recalled to aid in the upcoming battle. It was a highly political maneuver, meant to show the galaxy the difference between those that followed Shimrra and those who called themselves 'freed.' Of course, the maneuver also had a large risk factor involved. If Mon Calamari fell, the blame would no doubt be placed on the Freed Yuuzhan Vong defenders regardless of how hard they had tried.
There were other defenders, of course. The primary fleet of the Royal Hapan Navy, led by Queen Mother Tenel Ka herself. An Imperial taskforce led by Admiral Tanda Pryl. The Chiss under Major Irolia were also present, acting as a fast-response team to any area of the fleet that needed reinforcing. And a Galactic Alliance fleet, led by General Farlander, had point. Every fleet had been stocked with the most advanced cruisers and support ships available for the coming attack. And judging from the Intel they had on the approaching enemy fleet, they would need every advantage they could scrounge up.
Plans were made on top of plans, with the Galactic Alliance's most brilliant minds trying to find some way to help the fleet buy the time they needed. The desperation was clear when two Palanhi engineers, Hagan and Oster, both proposed an idea that boarded on insanity. The scheme involved rigging explosive charges at the core of the outer-most planet of the system, to be detonated when the enemy arrived. They had readied a planet in their own system during the Yuuzhan Vong invasion of their home system, but never had cause to completely go through with it when the Yuuzhan Vong had been beaten back.
The reasoning behind the plan was that the loss of one uninhabited planet was worth the cost of the countless lives deeper in the system. It went to show just how serious the situation was when High Command immediately approved of the plan and promptly installed the explosives within the core of Iceberg IV; a ball of rock and ice on the fringes of the Calamari system. There were other plans in the works, but Jaina still had to shake her head every time she thought of what was being dubbed the 'Oster-Hagan' solution.

"We can only hope," Tahiri shrugged, sounding more than a little dubious that *anything* would make the galaxy see the Freed Yuuzhan Vong as something more than a symbol to hate.
Her pessimism promptly evaporated, however, when she saw both Doran and Sannah sitting at the edge of the promenade with their feet dangling in the water. Next to them, Yaqeel, Jysella, Bazel, Valin, and Seff, were happily chatting about their latest adventures. The group of younger Jedi noticed both her and Jaina at the same time and happily waved them over.
"Tahiri!" Sannah said brightly.
"Jaina," Seff waved.
"Come and join us," Doran motioned.
"Sure," Tahiri said perkily, brightening almost immediately.
Jaina chuckled and followed Tahiri over to the edge of the platform. Sitting down, she removed the boots of her flight suit and followed the example of the others.
"Wicked-looking scar," Jaina gestured to Valin.
The elder Horn sibling briefly raised a hand to touch the lighter-toned brand that ran across the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, I thought it made me look pretty cool."
"Can you believe the idiot's going to keep it?" Jysella muttered, squawking in protest when Valin mussed up her hair.
"Is your arm okay?" Tahiri looked to Yaqeel. "I heard it kind of got… removed."
The Bothan Knight experimentally flexed her hand for Tahiri. "Still haven't got full mobility yet. Master Kina Ha said that I need to do a couple more Force-trances to get the cells back to where they were."
"Master…oh! The Jedi that was with the Mandalorians," Tahiri said, as the name clicked.
"Yeah," Sannah nodded. "I don't think she and Scout expected it, but the others have kind of become their unofficial apprentices too."
"They really know some unconventional Force techniques, and practical things too," Valin said sheepishly. "Master Esterhazy's been helping me and Sella use the Force to better analyze specific moments or scenes we're looking at."
"I don't know whether to be envious or in awe that you're getting lessons from Jedi of the Old Order," Jaina chuckled.
"Either one is fine," Yaqeel said with a laugh. "I'm still in deliriously happy shock. Must be the pain meds."
"Speaking of happy shocks, Doran, tell them," Sannah said excitedly, lightly pushing on his arm.
"Sannah," Doran rolled his eyes.

"Oh come on. It's definitely happy news."
"Happy news?" Tahiri tilted her head at the wayward male of the group.
"It's nothing really," Doran sighed, shaking his head. "You know how mom kind of temporarily rejoined the Wraiths while Sannah and I received our lessons from those Old Order Jedi?"
"Uh huh."
"Well, uh…apparently, with me gone, they got a little lonely and decided to make my replacement," Doran made a face and shuddered. "My mom's pregnant and she says it's a girl this time."
While Sannah and Yaqeel beamed happily, Bazel and Seff rolled their eyes.
"Isn't that great?" Sannah smiled. "He's going to be a big brother."
"Being the older sibling is definitely a lot of work," Jaina patted Doran's back with mock sympathy. "Good luck."
"Thanks," Doran said dryly. "I think dad gets to raise her this time, though, so I doubt I'll see much of her. That was the unofficial deal my two parents had when mom took me on a tour of the Outer Rim. I get to be the good Jedi and whoever comes after me gets to be some scary-good Force-sensitive commando."
"Oh, did you hear about Natua and Jedi Zekk and Rhysode?" Jysella said, topic bouncing once more.
"No, what happened?" Jaina blinked. She was finding it hard to keep up as the younger generation of Jedi seemed to be in an orbit all on their own. She wondered if that was what others saw when she was with Lowie, Tesar, and the others.
"They managed to establish a beachhead in Yuuzhan Vong space," Jysella said excitedly. "And freed Corulag in the process. You can find out more, they're due back later on today. But isn't that amazing?"
Tahiri and Jaina glanced at each other. "Yup, that sounds like something they'd do."
"You're not even remotely surprised?" Sannah laughed, while Jysella looked a little put out.
"You've had some adventures of your own. When all your friends go on crazy missions too, you kind of get used to it. Don't you?" Jaina chuckled.
"Good point," Bazel shook his head. "Our life definitely hasn't been lacking excitement since we stepped off the *Shelter*, eh Valin?"
"You just won 'Understatement of the Year,' Barv. It seemed like only yesterday we hiding out in the Maw, watching HoloNet reports of the war and listening to Master Tione tell us all about the adventures of those ancient Jedi."

"Who knew we'd be leading fleets and fighting on the front lines, re-enacting all those stories and HoloNet reports in person?" Seff said lightly. "Although advice for all of you. Having a ship blow up around you and getting spaced is kind of a pain."
"Getting impaled by amphistaffs too," Jysella said, not to be left out. "Those things look a lot cooler in the holovids."
As the group continued to chat, the sun slowly dipped beneath the sea, allowing the dazzling array of stars to sparkle up into the sky. It was another clear night, the galaxy they were sworn to defend blinking lazily down at them from high up above. It was hard to imagine that they could even make a dent in the galaxy's problems, as small as they were and as big as the galaxy was. Nevertheless, as young as they were, they were still Jedi. Still the galaxy's first and last line of defense against the darkness and chaos that threatened to overwhelm it.
In those few hours of twilight, however, they were also young adults. Having seen much more than many teens their age should see, having done much more than many had a chance to do in an entire lifetime. Their chat light and full of mirth as they regaled each other with the things they had experienced and seen. The Force bond that existed between the young Knights kept their spirits up and their hearts warm even as the cool evening breeze washed over them. Laughter rang out, playful shoving and giggles. Even with the impending attack, the Jedi Knights enjoyed the brief reprieve from the responsibilities placed on their young shoulders.
And then the spell was broken
The entire group tensed as one as the Force seemed to shudder in distress.
"The Yuuzhan Vong?" Jysella whispered anxiously, scrambling to her feet.
"Can't be, it's too early," Doran shook his head. "Their fleet shouldn't be here for another few days."
They reached out with their senses, trying to find out what was wrong. They didn't have to search for long as a massive plume of fire erupted out from the center of the base. And then another. And another. Those more in tune with the Force than the others could feel individual lives being snuffed out with every passing second.
"Come on!" Jaina's shout stirred the others from their stunned state, and they began to run towards the base alongside her.
[o-o-[III]-o-o]
Vale grinned happily as she pulled herself out of the flight-simulator. She had finally achieved a score comparable to most of the others in

her squadron and no longer felt as bad that it was she, and not some other pilot with more skill, who had Jaina's back. She hadn't been so worried for herself as she had been for their fearless squadron commander whose back she would be watching. With Jaina's previous wingman being an ace pilot in the Chiss Ascendancy, with more kills to his name than most pilots would have in a lifetime, Vale knew she had had some pretty big boots to fill. Not that her new high score on the simulator even put her in the same league. But at least it showed some improvement.

She glanced at the clock on the wall, grimacing. A high score, but a couple of hours of sitting in a simulator after a day's worth of exercises in the cockpit of her X-wing was a pain in the back, neck, and whatever else one needed to strain when sitting in a cockpit. Several tendons popped as she stretched her arms out and groaned in relief. What she needed now was a good meal and a shower. In either order was fine with her.

She heard the door to the simulator room open behind her and said lightly. "Here for some late night practicing? I'm done for the day, so the room's all yours."

She turned to face whoever had entered, and then gasped as a blinding pain filled her midsection. Very weakly, she looked down, seeing a glowing purple blade embedded in her sternum. She looked up, eyes wide with disbelief and anguish, and saw her own reflection in the darkened visor of her attacker's helmet. The blade was pulled free, and Vale staggered backwards a couple of steps, sinking to her knees as she struggled to take in air.

Her attacker swiftly swept the blade through the air, and after a searing pain at her neck, Vale knew no more.

The scene was repeated several times more all throughout the Twin Suns barracks as all the pilots who had stayed on base soon found themselves in a world of trouble.

Twin Suns Five and Six, Darra Beks and Naxus Fio, had been listening to music in the safety of their shared quarters when they saw a brief motion out of the corner of their eyes. Assuming that it was their commanding officer coming to check up on them, they swung themselves out of their bunks and snapped to attention. An amphistaff snapped out and promptly tore open their throats.

Twin Suns Eight, Sybor Telinis, was doing work on his fighter in the now quiet hangar bay. The work crews had all left for the night, but the silence was welcoming for him. Busy beneath his fighter trying to repair damage caused by a micro-meteorite, he heard the heavy footsteps of someone entering the cavernous hangar.

"Hey, is that you Nine?"
There was a snap-hiss of a lightsaber as a glowing blade severed the X-wing's landing struts and promptly dropped the several ton starfighter onto the unfortunate pilot beneath.
The deaths were lightning quick, no witnesses, and no alarms sounded. No one had expected the Yuuzhan Vong to launch a suicide mission ahead of their main attack, and no one had expected the Yuuzhan Vong to have Force-aware soldiers infiltrate one of the best defended bases on the planet. And since the defenses were more for keeping people out, the Slayers were able to operate with impunity as they purged each building of their occupants.
[o-o-[IV]-o-o]
"Here it is, the best food my measly paychecks could afford." Zindra held a box of food up into the air and grinned at the members of Barefoot Squadron as they relaxed in the all-purpose room of their barracks. The mouth-watering scents of the food in the carry-out boxes quickly spread through the room.
"Ahhh, those steaks smell really good, Seven," new Barefoot pilot, Jo'dam Cidraster said eagerly. A farmboy from Tatooine fresh out of the academy, he was still adjusting to the 'great wide galaxy' that had been opened up to him. He had spent his youth studying the geography of countless worlds, but his trip to the academy had been the first time he had actually left the desert planet. He was well liked, often entertaining the squadron about stories from his life back at his family's moisture farm. With three younger sisters, a pet horned-toad, a side hobby of dentistry, and an extended family that rivaled the size of the Darklighters, he never ceased to have some type of tale handy to the situation the squadron was in. "By the way, did I ever tell you all about the time my gran decided to cook a bantha using the wing of my T-16? I love my gran 'ta death, but old ladies with plasma torches should never be allowed near expensive skyhoppers and bespin gas canisters."
The rest of the squad all rolled their eyes, though the new Adumari pilot, Byt Uffbo, looked on in alarm. "She was okay though? Wasn't she?"
"You kidding? My gran could probably walk into a sandstorm and come out without a grain of sand on her," Jo'dam laughed. "She blew the heck out of the shed, and my skyhopper, but the only thing she lost was her dentures."
As Zindra distributed the containers of food from the bag, she looked at what she had left and frowned. "Blast it. I asked for five noodle

trays, they only gave me three. Hang on a sec guys. I'll see if I can't flag down that service droid and give it a good talking to."
"Don't take too long, Zindra. We might eat all the food." Barefoot Four, Zyca Lar, said laughingly.
"You guys would, wouldn't you," Zindra said with sarcastic cheer.
She gave the distribution duties over to Barefoot Eight, Bothan pilot Qui and took off at a light run. As she hurried after the droid that had delivered their food, she passed several mechanics dressed head-to-toe in overalls. "Oh, hey guys, you still here? Why don't you join the rest of the Barefoots, I'm treating them, and it's really thanks to you all that our fighters work as well as they do."
The leader of the mechanics tilted his head, face hidden behind a welding visor.
"Just in the rec room down the hall, everyone's there," Zindra gestured. She glanced back down the hall anxiously. "Sorry, I have to run. I'm trying to catch up to that droid that nerfed my order, I'll talk with you guys later!"
Zindra continued to run, barely waiting for the automated doors to slide open as she slipped out into the cool Mon Cal night. The moment she took her first step, however, she paused. Recalling the mechanics she passed, her mind was just catching up to what she had seen. She had been so preoccupied with catching up to the waiter droid that it had almost slipped her mind. And as the memory became clear, panic rose.
"No!" Zindra's eyes grew round in terror. She clearly remembered seeing an amphistaff wrapped around the wrist of one of the mechanics.
She spun around on her heels to and made to re-enter the building, when a shock wave lifted her off her feet followed by a blaze of flame and light.
[o-o-[V]-o-o]
Alarms were blaring everywhere as Jaina led the others towards the flaming structures.
"Control, give me a status report, what's going on?" Jaina yelled into her comm.
"Unknown, Goddess. Advise you find a secure location and bunker down. If this is a Yuuzhan Vong attack, you will most likely be their primary target. Freed Yuuzhan Vong and Hapan reinforcements have already been scrambled."
"*'If'* this is a Yuuzhan Vong attack?" Jaina said incredulously. "What else could it if it's not an att…"

"Jaina, I'm not picking up any Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri said softly. "Reach out with the Force, you can feel them."
"It's 'those' guys again," Bazel grumbled, pulling his lightsaber free.
"On Cato Neimoidia, They called themselves 'Slayers'," Tahiri said in a low voice. "I gave an arm I severed to the science people so they can find out more."
"Could have just asked me," Sannah said, her voice unnaturally grim.
"Dead Jedi cells slapped together," Doran elaborated, to the horror of the older Jedi.
Another explosion, this time in the direction of the military barracks, and horror was put on the back burner.
"We *are* the targets," Tahiri said, paling. "That was the Barefoot building."
A plume of fire rose up into the sky, and Jaina swore. "And that was Twin Suns."
"Where's Lowie and Tesar?" Tahiri said quickly.
"They went to the city to pick up some supplies," Jaina said. "They actually should be back any time now."
Another explosion.
"What are we going to do?" Yaqeel looked to Jaina.
"Valin, Jysella, Barv, Yaqeel, with me," Jaina nodded once. "The others go with Tahiri. These 'Slayers' just made one very big mistake attacking our squadrons."
[o-o-[VI]-o-o]
"Now that doesn't look good," Ganner said, his face locking into a mask of cheer as smoke rose up from the base they had been about to land at. "Pilot, take us in."
"Control is waving us off, sir! Says the area is unsecure and they are unsure of the number of assailants!"
"Our friends our down there, take us in," Zekk reinforced.
The pilot hesitated, but then nodded. "Yes, sir."
As the ship moved in for its final approach, however, three blades of glowing purple flew out from the surface. Though the pilot tried to avoid the blades, they tracked the path of the shuttle and promptly sliced three glowing lines into the bottom of the craft.
All at once, Natua, Ganner, and Zekk were thrown into the nearby bulkhead as the shuttle pitched forward.
"We've lost control of landing thrusters and engines! Hang on, we're going in hard!"
One of the larger buildings on the ground rapidly shrunk in distance as the shuttle careened out of control through the night's sky. A split

second later it slammed into the building in an ear-shattering blast, sending shrapnel and debris flying every which way.

[o-o-[VII]-o-o]

Tekli and Imperial scientist Sanix Fous were in one of the base's many open-aired courtyards with other members of their science team, taking a small break from their studies.

"I know what the readings said, but it'd take bio-science beyond what our own shapers and people are capable of," Sanix said, sipping a cup of caf. "Cloning a cross-species, artificially created sample made of dead cells shouldn't be possible. It's like they used an artificial, hybrid dead cell and recreated a functioning live one in its exact image."

"It's the only way to explain the allelic variations we're seeing," Tekli argued. "We've seen it before with the voxyn. The Yuuzhan Vong create an alpha subject and use the tissue from that subject rather than create variations within the DNA for a more diverse species."

Just as Sanix was about to respond, klaxon alarms blared loudly above their heads. What few interior lights were visible from their position promptly turned red just as the rumbling echoes of explosions sounded in the distance. Only moments later, a shuttle flew over their building in a thunderous racket, its engines making really unhealthy whining noises and flames were exploding out its back. It seemed locked in its current course, which was directly into the upper levels of one of the buildings that made up the science-wing of the base.

The scientists held up their hands on instinct as the shuttle slammed into the towering structure in a violent collision. Despite the ball of fire that emerged from the blast, as well as the bits and pieces of debris that began to rain down, the team of scientists were still completely at a loss as to what was happening and could only stare dumbly at the damaged building above them.

Receiving the gist of what was happening through her Force bond with the others, Tekli gasped. "We need to get out of here now. The arm we have in the lab, the friends of the one it belongs to are here!"

Glowing circles promptly appeared in the thin pre-fab duracrete sheets that made up the walls of the surrounding buildings. Almost in scientific curiosity, the scientists all stared on in disbelief. The thin duracrete sheets fell away, and muscular, stocky Slayers stepped out from the holes.

"Sanix, take the others and go," Tekli whispered.

"And you?"

"There's no way we'll be able to outrun them if I don't hold them off," Tekli pulled out her lightsaber.

"There are five of them," Sanix protested.

Tekli glanced at the scientist with an almost apologetic smile. "Then please run as fast as you can. I'll try to buy you as much time as possible. Now go."
Sanix swallowed, and then gestured to the other scientists, still stunned with fear. "Come on! Follow me!"
The scientists took off, sprinting as the five Slayers arranged themselves in a single line on the opposite side of the courtyard; lightsabers and amphistaffs at the ready. Seeing Tekli as their only opponent, they confidently closed the distance until they were mid-way across the courtyard.
Tekli met their approach, step for step, her lone sapphire blade shimmering. As she eyed the Force-aware soldiers standing only a couple steps away from her, she met the gaze of the one at the center. "You've caused enough death and destruction. Please surrender, I have no wish to fight."
"Then you are weak," laughed one of the Slayers.
"No, she's just smarter than us brutes who only know how to make things go boom," a voice said from behind the Slayers.
The Slayers spun around and saw three figures standing in front of the holes they had made in the wall.
"*Jeedai*," the Slayer sneered.
"Ugly…"
"Ganner, you don't have to insult every guy we face," Zekk sighed, shaking his head.
"What took you so long?" Tekli said, leaping backwards to put some distance between herself and the Slayers. Now that she had kept the Slayers' attention, she had no desire to be so close to them.
"Apologies," Natua said. "It was my first time surviving a shuttle crash and navigating a burning building before jumping from several dozen stories to the ground. I won't slow them down the next time."
"You're forgiven," Tekli said without a single pause for incredulity. "Any serious injuries?"
"Beyond burnt clothes and a few scratches, nothing." Ganner said in negative. "Although Zekk did manage to lose his shirt again."
"Enough talk!" Roared the Slayer.
"Oh, right. Sorry. Fighting it is," Ganner said quickly, his lightsaber flying to his hand. He took a step forward, and then re-evaluated his opponents. "By the way, Tekli. Just what are these things?"
"New soldiers created by the Yuuzhan Vong," a new voice replied. Stepping through the double-doors Sanix and the other scientists had retreated through was the Imperial Director of Research, Roleesta Stone. "Force sensitive, but not trained to use the Force."

"Director Stone?" Tekli blinked in surprise at the older woman. "Why didn't you retreat with the others?"
The director allowed a ghost of a smile to cross her face as she undid a cylindrical container at the side of her hip. "I've had enough of running and hiding to last me several life-times. It's been a while, but I think I still have what it takes."
"Have what…" The Jedi all blinked in astonishment when they realized that they could feel the Imperial scientist in the Force.
"Oh," Ganner blinked, suddenly feeling very dumb that he hadn't connected the dots sooner. After his countless trips to the Imperial Library to search for Zonama Sekot, he hadn't even suspected that the cranky librarian had been more than she appeared. Although, he mentally conceded, she would have had to have been good at hiding herself to have lasted so long.
"Oh indeed," the Director activated her lightsaber. "Allow me to reintroduce myself. Olee Starstone, Jedi Knight of the Jedi Order of the Grand Republic. Would you all do me the honor of allowing me to fight at the side of other Jedi once more?"
Tekli inclined her head briefly. "We'd be honored, Jedi Starstone."
"It's been a while since I heard that name," the older woman smiled. "Far too long."
Tekli and Olee stood at each other's side, while Ganner, Zekk, and Natua flanked the Slayers between them.
The Slayer leader didn't appear at all intimidated by Olee's appearance. "One *Jeedai*, or five, you will still fall!"
"Really?" Ganner said with a winning grin. "Prove it!"
And with a burst of motion, both sides launched themselves at each other.

[o-o-[VIII]-o-o]

Tahiri felt some amount of fear as she approached the barracks for the Barefoot pilots. Though she had only just been voicing her discomfort with the new members, they had still been a part of a new family she had never had before. And there were also the older Barefoots, who had been with her at the start and made the entire squadron possible with their positive support. She felt her heart pounding as anxiety threatened to get the better of her. They had to be all right. They just had to.
She, Sannah, Doran, and Seff rounded the corner and froze. The entire barracks was completely engulfed in a raging fire. Black smoke, glowing orange, rose high into the sky, and there were audible pops and snaps as the fire ate away at the building.
"Oh no," Tahiri whispered, her mouth dry.

"Tahiri," Sannah reached out and placed a supportive hand on the older teen's arm.
Tahiri took a step forward, shaking her head. They couldn't have *all* been killed. The flames raged before her, casting a hellish glow in the early night. There was no sign of life, no movement.
"Over here," Seff called out, kneeling next to a body.
The other three young Jedi quickly moved to his side.
"Zindra!" Tahiri rasped, kneeling next to the badly burned figure of her squadmate.
"She's still alive, just barely," Seff said helplessly. "We need to get the medics over here quick though."
"We have something better," Doran said, gesturing to his girlfriend. "Sannah, do your thing."
Sannah nodded, cracking her knuckles as she knelt next to Zindra's body. After a brief examination, she grimaced but nodded. "I can stabilize her. But we'll still need those medics."
"I'll call…" Tahiri whirled around in time for a powerful Force blast to hit all of them like a sledgehammer.
The quartet of young Jedi were lifted off their feet and brutally slammed into an unforgiving wall behind them. Winded and daze, the four could barely look up at their assailants. There were nine of them, their stature and Force-presences identifying them as Slayers.
"Behold," One of them proclaimed. "The powers of the gods!"
Tahiri was lifted up high into the air by the combined Force grip of several, her body jerked and thrashed about like a rag-doll. Sannah let out an angry snarl and tried to charge the Slayers, only to have another sledgehammer-like blow send her flying back into the wall.
The Slayer smiled victoriously, activating his lightsaber. "And behold the death of a false god."
With unerring accuracy, he hurled the glowing sword towards Tahiri's defenseless form.
"No!" Sannah yelled, struggling against a crushing Force-grip holding her in place. Another blow had her and the others fighting for consciousness, sealing Tahiri's fate.
Before the lightsaber made contact with Tahiri, however, an aqua-colored blur sliced the lambent saber in two, promptly extinguishing the would-be lethal projectile. The viridian bar of light shimmered out of existence as its owner continued to plummet through the sky from somewhere else much higher; the figure a mere shadow in the darkness of the night.
The Slayers were dumbfounded and the Jedi were shocked as they traced the shadow's descent. A split second later, Tahiri's savior landed

on the ground in a crouched position in the middle of the nine Slayers, a small gust of dust and ash flying out beneath her on impact.
The flames of the nearby barracks reflected off the savior's red hair and rancor-skin leather armor. Slowly, the figure rose and regarded the Slayers with a raised eyebrow.
"Greetings."
"*Jeedai*," The Slayer sneered.
"You have a friend of mine in the air. Release her and I shall spare your lives," Tenel Ka said in cool response.
The Slayers activated their lightsabers and unfurled their amphistaffs.
"Since you are so eager for death, we will kill you first," a Slayer growled.
Tenel Ka very calmly re-activated her lightsaber and blurred again, leaping out of the center of their group with a gust of Force-created wind. When she landed a little ways away, two of the Slayers had been decapitated, and the others were staring at her in shock. Looking over her shoulder, she cocked her head in challenge. "You are definitely most welcome to try."
The Slayers took several steps towards her, brandishing their weapons.
"There is only one of you. And we will still kill the false goddess as you look on in helpless despair."
"You are mistaken," Tenel Ka said.
Several more lightsaber blades activated, and the Slayers looked over their shoulders in alarm. Doran, Sannah and Seff had been revived by two more newcomers, who had also pulled Tahiri free of the grip holding her in the air.
"I will concentrate on the injured pilot, lightsaber fights were never my specialty," the long-necked form of Kina Ha was clearly distinguishable in the shifting shadows of the night.
"Fine with me," Scout nodded, pulling out a worn and well-used lightsaber. "It's been a while since I've fought side-by-side with other Jedi. This should be interesting."
"You're more than welcome to join us, Master Esterhazy," Doran said with a grin.
"More *Jeedai*?" The lead Slayer growled.
"We tend to watch out for each other," Tahiri hissed, using the Force to relieve the soreness in her muscles and joints after her stint as a ragdoll. She and the others formed up opposite of the Slayers. "Thanks for the save, Your Majesty."
Tenel Ka tilted her head in acknowledgement, and then returned her gaze to the Slayers. "Now, I believe one of you was going to try and take my life?"

[o-o-[IX]-o-o]

The fights across the base were fierce, but also short. As skilled as the Slayers had been against Yuuzhan Vong warriors, the warriors they had faced had all been brought up with a set training and fighting style. That same training regiment used by the Yuuzhan Vong warriors had also been adapted for the Slayers. The single fighting style, cobbled together from memory-imprints of captured Jedi and the abilities of the best warriors the Yuuzhan Vong had, had been stamped into the minds of each of the Slayers. Though the Force also kept them much more aware of their surroundings, their opponents had been using the Force for years as compared to their several months.

It was a sharp contrast to the many Jedi they were facing. All the Jedi had their own unique lightsaber styles, all had their own experiences and ways of learning, all had the Force. Whether it was Tahiri's amphistaff-saber dual style, Jysella's dance-like inspired moves, Doran and Sannah's esoteric Mando-influenced combat styles, Scout's traditional Republic-era techniques, or Jaina's aggressive and skilled recklessness, the Slayers were given neither the time to adapt nor the time to study each of the fighting styles they were up against. If one style wasn't working, the Jedi would effortlessly switch off with each other, further bewildering and throwing off the Yuuzhan Vong-grown soldiers. The previous engagement had also heartened the younger Jedi against the Slayers and gotten them used to that singular style employed by the genetically-modified soldiers.

Once the element of surprise had been tossed aside, the Slayers ultimately proved to be the inferior fighter. That wasn't to say that the Slayers had been wholly ineffective. In their brief rampage through the base against a force several times their size, hundreds of people had been caught off guard and lost their lives. The true death toll wouldn't be known until the later hours of the next day, but the sheer number of bodies and burning buildings was a testament to the Slayers' lethalness.

Breathing heavily, Jaina deactivated her lightsaber as the last Slayer collapsed in three pieces in front of her. She looked around grimly, the smell of acrid smoke thick in the air. Lowie and Tesar had arrived part-way through the battle, using their speeder as a battering ram and bowling over four Slayers. Both were now grimly searching the nearby buildings for any more survivors, both enemy and friendly.

Jysella and Bazel were standing by with the two other surviving members of Twin Suns, who had been found buried in a pile of debris, while Valin was likewise deactivating his lightsaber after his own fight.

"That went better than the last couple of times," Bazel grunted out. "Only have a lightsaber burn this time around."
"I must be the lucky one," Jysella said, patting herself down. "Second time I've faced these things, and I still don't have a scratch."
"It really is unfair how you and your brother can absorb lightsaber energy like that," Bazel said to the younger Jedi.
"We have to be ready for it," Jysella shrugged, and she gestured to her brother. "Otherwise we end up looking uglier than before."
"Thanks, Sella," Valin said sarcastically.
"Anytime, Val," Jysella stuck her tongue out at him.
Jaina smiled faintly and approached the surviving, non-Jedi members of her squad. "Tilath, Beelyath, you two okay?"
"We've been better, Goddess," the Mon Cal pilot of the pair said weakly.
"We did just have an entire burning building fall on us," Tilath added, holding her broken arm against her chest. Both pilots were covered in several wicked looking burns, cuts, and all manner of injuries that corresponded to having said burning building fall on them. "I guess, like Jedi Horn, we were the lucky ones."
Tesar and Lowbacca emerged from the nearby building, their distress at finding no other survivors clear in the Force.
"No others?" Jaina said softly.
"[All dead]," Lowbacca confirmed with a mournful howl. "[Even Vale.]"
Jaina closed her eyes, the sharp pain of losing nearly her entire squadron shaking her to her core. Losing them in a space-battle was one thing. Losing them when they were supposed to be safe and secure within the base, without even the opportunity to fight back, was something else. She had only said her well-wishes to them several hours ago, and now they were almost all gone.
But as soon as that pain rose up and twisted her stomach in painful knots, she could feel her friends reach out through the Force and through their bond, reinforcing her strength and resolve. Jaina exhaled shakily, fighting back tears as she nodded thankfully to Tesar and Lowbacca. Even Valin and the younger Jedi added their own presences to the meld to help her absorb the loss of her friends and wingmen. The deaths still hurt and left her with an empty feeling, but the pain wasn't as pronounced as it had originally been.
She released another breath, and then placed a hand on Tilath and Beelyath's shoulders. "I'm glad the two of you made it out. Lowie and Tesar will escort you two to the nearest medic. I want the both of you in fighting shape when the rest of the Vong get here. We'll fly for the

others and make their deaths mean something. When the time comes, the two of you will be my wingmen, understood?"
"Understood, Goddess," Tilath saluted with her good arm.
"Yes, ma'am," Beelyath agreed.
"Lowie," Jaina said.
The Wookie nodded and he and Tesar vigilantly took the two injured pilots under their wing.
"Control, this is Solo. Sectors one through seven on the east side is clear of hostiles. Status update?"
"Isolated fighting still going on in the southern sectors, but Jedi Rhysode reports he and Jedi Knights Zekk, Wan, and Tekli are taking care of it Most of the damage was to the buildings in the western part of the base."
"Where the hangars and majority of the barracks are," Jaina surmised.
"*Affirmative. We've received word that Barefoot Squadron has only one survivor. The three other squadrons stationed on base have also taken heavy casualties. Reports are still coming in, but we believe most of the X-wings on the ground have been destroyed, including those of your squadron. That sector still has yet to be fully secured and all surviving personnel have been evacuated."*
Jaina took the information in and held up her comlink again. "I copy. Do any of the security forces need our help? With me are the Jedi Horns, and Warv."
There was a pause as the control room relayed her message to the other units. *"Negative, Goddess. Situation has been brought under control. Jedi Master Durron and Jedi Knight Corran Horn have brought reinforcements from the fleet and are mopping up the last of the hold-outs in the western sectors. The battle is over."*
"Yeah," Jaina whispered to herself, gazing about the destruction all around her. "And not a moment too soon."
[o-o-[X]-o-o]
Nom Anor wondered if he was blessed or cursed. Huddled together with the rest of the non-essential base staff fleeing the combat zone, he was close enough to a security guard to overhear via the comm-system that the Slayers' attack had failed.
"I.D?" One of the guards said, as Nom Anor approached the base's outer perimeter.
Nom Anor held up the ID chit he had taken from one of the many dead that littered the base. The guard swept the scanner over it and waved him on, and Nom Anor continued to move with the flow of the crowd.
The former Executor could hardly believe his luck. With the Slayers all

dead, and with his masquer, he was literally free to go wherever he pleased.
Shimrra, Jedi, it didn't matter anymore. He would be executed if he returned without Jaina and Tahiri's heads. He'd be executed if he surrendered, put on a mockery of a trial for all the galaxy to see. He could not even return to his guise as Yuu'sha, as it was now known who the Prophet truly had been. He had no allies, no place he could call home in this foreign galaxy, no one who would offer him a friendly hand.
But that didn't matter.
Nom Anor inhaled the rich sea breeze and smiled. Maybe this was what Naazar and all the others felt when they realized that they no longer had to carry the burdens placed on them by Shimrra.
Freedom.
The morning sun was only just beginning to rise, so the stars high up above were still visible. Waiting for a tram to take him to the nearest civilian starport, Nom Anor just stared up at its vast expanse. He could hide out in any one of those systems. He had the ability to just disappear. He would stay silent for a year or two, let the galaxy forget about him, and then slowly work his way into a position of power. Governor, or Prime Minister, or any other title would do. His life was now his own, and he wasn't going to take orders from anyone ever again.
The shuttles arrived, and the base personnel clambered to get onboard. No doubt they were eager to get away from all the death and destruction and retire to the safety of their warm beds.
"Dr. Sheldar," a voice called out.
Nom Anor took a moment to remember that 'Dr. Sheldar' was the identity he had assumed, and then turned with the equivalent of a wan smile plastered on his face.
"Dr. Sheldar, your personal transport?" A voice called out from the inside of a rather luxurious looking shuttle.
Nom Anor quickly hid his surprise. Having assumed the man's identity just to escape, he had had little time to look up the man's background. But if the man was important enough to rate a private transport, that was all the better.
"Thank you. I apologize, the attack has frayed my nerves somewhat," Nom Anor said, stepping up and into the transport.
"No apologies necessary, sir," the driver said, as the door closed.
Nom Anor seated himself on a rather comfy couch, accepting the drink a serving droid offered him and allowing his body to relax. He may not share the infidels' idea of luxury, but he had to admit that he could

definitely get used to it. He could even consider it his reward for everything he had done. Regardless of his more recent failures, there was no denying his contributions to the war-effort for the sake of his people.
As he began creating a new identity in his mind, his imagination took him to a life of luxury, of fame, all under the noses of the Jedi and all others who had turned their noses up at him. Yes, the war may have been lost, but he still had a glittering future to look forward to.
The transport took off, and instead of following the other shuttles and trams, began to head higher into the atmosphere.
Nom Anor blinked and hit the side-comm which connected him to the enclosed cockpit. "Where are we heading, driver?"
"To the fleet." Came the short reply.
"Oh," Nom Anor said. "If it's not too much trouble, could we make a stop at my home first? I wish to, freshen up, after that harrowing experience."
"We have our orders, Executor."
Nom Anor froze in place, his blood running cold. "Ex…excuse me?"
The door to the cockpit opened, and Nom Anor couldn't help but shrink in his seat as the bulky form of a Slayer entered the cabin. And it wasn't just any Slayer, but the one with the disfigured face, the one he had only recently used as an example to the others.
"You!" Nom Anor jerked upwards as icy fear kept him in place.
"Why so surprised, Executor?" The Slayer growled, his forming seemingly filling the cabin.
"You're….you're supposed to be dead!" Nom Anor said numbly, scrambling backwards.
"As are you," the Slayer noted. "The gods must have had different plans for us."
"You did not assist your brothers in attacking the Jedi?" Nom Anor breathed, eyes wild as he sought to buy enough time to think himself out of the latest predicament. "It was your duty to the gods to die in battle at their side. You've failed the gods, you've failed Shimrra, you've failed me! Stay your Jedi sword and stand down! I order you to stand down!"
The Slayer leaned forward, leering as the glow from the overhead light highlighted the infected wound on his cheek. "*I* am no droid. You cannot order me about, and then toss me aside just because you no longer have a need. Only the gods can decide when I will die, and *you*, Executor, are not a god."
"I…" That was all Nom Anor managed to say the Slayer jammed his lambent saber into Nom Anor's open mouth. Nom Anor only had time

to make a muffled sound of terror before the blade activated and emerged out the back of his head.
The Slayer deactivated his lightsaber, and Nom Anor's body slumped to the ground. Without a second thought, the shaped warrior opened the transport's hatch and kicked the body out. It disappeared with an unnoticeable splash, sinking deep into the waters of Mon Calamari and out of sight.
Three other Slayers stood by their leader, looks of confusion and doubt on their faces.
"What shall we do next?"
The leader turned towards his brothers. "We shall go wherever the gods take us."
"Then we shall return to our father, the long-lived Shimrra?"
"No," the lead Slayer shook his head.
"Then the gods will surely punish our disobedience," another said, a note of fear in his voice.
"They will not. We are their instruments, their true children. We have been granted powers those who call themselves the children of Yun-Yuuzhan do not have. To serve them even better, we must learn to use our powers. Our brothers were killed by the *Jeedai* because, though they had the powers of the gods, they did not know how to use them to the fullest extent. The *Jeedai* did and that is why they won. We will head into the stars and the gods will guide us to our teacher."
"And what of father?"
"She-Who-Was-Shaped spoke one truth," the lead Slayer closed the hatch. "Father sees himself superior to us, when in reality, it is we who are better than him. He would kill us before we gained the knowledge and strength we needed to best serve the gods. Once we are ready, we will return much stronger than before. And when we do, it is the Yuuzhan Vong who will serve *us* and not us serving them."
The luxury shuttle continued on its outbound course without further incident. Minutes later, it disappeared into hyperspace, scheming Slayers and all.

[o-o-[XI]-o-o]

The damage wrought by the Slayers had been immense. The five elite fighter squadrons that had been stationed at the military base had been wholly decimated. Forty-five of sixty pilots were dead, most of the survivors floating in bacta tanks. Nearly all of the fighters were burning scraps of heap, and the mechanics and tech-teams reduced to fractions of their size. And those were just the personnel connected to the fighter squadrons. When the final tally came in, nearly five

thousand people had lost their lives, with several hundred more wounded.
The Slayers may have only numbered fifty in all, but they had caused havoc on an unimaginable scale before they had been stopped. The added fear that the Yuuzhan Vong shapers under Shimrra were no longer sticking to their seven cortices also rocked the intel and Freed Yuuzhan Vong communities. Combined with the information brought back by the Cato Neimodia and Lorodan teams, the evidence that heretical shaping was becoming the norm was more than disturbing. Without the traditional restrictions, just like the Freed shapers, Shimrra's shapers would be able to shape all manner of things. The Slayers were only evidence that the war needed to be ended, and soon. There was no telling what else Shimrra's shapers would come up with given their new found freedom.
But all that didn't really matter at the moment. Nas Choka and his fleet were just two days away, and the war looked as if it would be decided by the coming battle in any case. Not that the people at the Mon Calamari military base were prepared for it.
Tahiri sat on the floor in a filled med-bay, staring at the countless bacta tanks that held the wounded and dying from the night's attack. Teams of medics and medical droids moved back and forth to handle another influx of injured, while Tekli, Sannah, Kina Ha, and Master Cilghal did their best to handle the more severe cases. Voices overlapped one and other, mingling with the rhythmic beeping of the various machines doing the best to keep everyone else alive. Those that the teams hadn't been able to save were quickly carried out to make room for others.
It was a ceaseless bustle of activity and noise, but Tahiri stayed where she was, hugging her legs and trying to be as small as possible in a corner of the med-bay.
Her face was emotionless, though her eyes were reddened from tears and lack of sleep, and her blond hair was a mess. Burns decorated her clothing, and ash and grime was smudged all over her hands, feet, and face, but she didn't seem to care. At the moment, her deadened gaze was focused on one bacta tank in particular.
Zindra Daine had been so close to death that for a moment Tahiri had been afraid that she truly would be the last Barefoot. If it hadn't been for Kina Ha's timely arrival, Zindra would never have made it long enough to get to a bacta tank. Unfortunately, Zindra was the *only* other member of Barefoot squadron to survive the night.
Tahiri was a picture of silent misery as she just rocked herself back and forth. Losing the Barefoots was more than painful, like having someone

reach in and twist her stomach and chest into knots. Having a place of her own outside of the Solo family and the Jedi, a second family, had been so amazing. This was something only she had had, a squadron of her own. So many good times, so many happy memories. The laughter, the incredulous expressions on their faces when she and Zindra had taught them Yuuzhan Vong coralskipper formations. The cheer Tahiri felt when they decided to name the squadron in honor of her. All those memories flashed through her mind. It was one thing to grow up an orphan, never really having a family. It was another to get a family and to have it torn away from you. And Tahiri couldn't help but feel guilty that a part of it was her fault.

The doors to the busy room slid open once more, the new arrival homing in on Tahiri's small presence with ease.

"Hey, there you are," Jaina said softly, taking a seat next to Tahiri and stretching her legs out.

"I'm sorry," Tahiri whispered hoarsely, her gaze never once leaving Zindra's bacta-floating form.

"For what?" Jaina tilted her head.

"If it wasn't for me, none of this would have happened. I told the *Veila* not to fire on the Slayers on Cato Neimoidia. I spared them because I stupidly thought that I could get through to them like I did with the Freed Ones. I thought they deserved a chance at life, to be more than what they were bred for. I forgot that they were just muscle-bound, mindless pawns who shouldn't have been alive in the first place," Tahiri hissed softly, resting her forehead on the tops of her knees as her body shook. "I should have just blasted them all back into the pieces the shapers had put them together from. Why did I have to show them mercy? Why did this have to happen? If anything I was the one who should have paid for my mistakes, not everyone else."

Jaina tried to reach out with the Force to comfort the younger woman, but Tahiri had thrown up all sorts of mental barriers. It was as if Tahiri wanted to stew in her own self-hatred and misery, felt like she deserved it. Knowing full well how Anakin-like she was being, Jaina just reached out an arm and pulled Tahiri into a one-armed hug. Tahiri stiffened, but didn't pull away. "There's nothing to apologize for, Tahiri. You couldn't have known."

"I should have!" Tahiri looked at Jaina with green eyes fully of confusion and self-loathing. "I got so used to being treated like a goddess by the Yuuzhan Vong, by having so much success with the Freed Ones, that I started to think I could do anything. The Slayers were nothing more than enemy soldiers, and I should have treated them as enemy soldiers, but I let them live and they went on to do all

this." Tahiri gestured wildly at the med-bay. "What else was I supposed to expect when I try to convince a bunch of shaped abominations that they could be more than they were created to be? I messed up, and it should have been me lying on a slab or in a bacta tank, not the rest of my squadron!"
Jaina surprised everyone watching by slapping Tahiri hard, sending the teen toppling over. Standing, Jaina glared down at Tahiri. "Don't you dare say something like that, Tahiri." Jaina hissed, shaking a finger at the startled blond. "I've lost half my squadron! I lost Vale! And it hurts yes. But that's nothing compared to what I would have felt if you were among them! I was a mess when I first lost my wingman Anni, only one person, and I should be a mess right now. The only reason why I'm not falling to pieces over this is because you, and Lowie, and Tesar, and all the others made it out of this carbon flush in one piece! You're a little sister to me, the galaxy to my little brother, and kriff it all if I'm going to let anything happen to the two of you! What happened isn't your fault. This is a war and people die. But you are *never* going to be one of them as long as I draw a breath, is that clear?"
Though Jaina had said the words in a heated whisper, she might as well have been yelling in the silence that had followed the very loud slap. Tahiri looking up with tear-filled green eyes, bowed her head in shame and didn't say anything in return.
Jaina, her entire body trembling, very slowly sat back down. Part of her reaction had stemmed from the fact that there were indeed whispers and stories circulating the base that placed the blame for the attack squarely on Tahiri's shoulders. The story had spread out of a drunken celebration of the lives of those who had died, when a loud-mouthed intel officer quite vociferously announced Tahiri's role on Cato Neimoidia while loudly cursing her and wishing her dead. The information had spread like a wildfire, and coupled with Tahiri's proclivity for anything Yuuzhan Vong, was quickly making the young woman a scapegoat for the attack on what was supposed to be a highly secured military base. From being called a scar-headed traitor, to others actually wishing her dead, the message was still spreading.
"I'm sorry, Jaina," Tahiri finally whispered again, the tears finally flowing as she emitted a small whimper. "I wasn't thinking. I just…I've never lost…"
Jaina closed her own eyes, trying to get a handle on her own emotions. "No, it's okay."
When Jaina pulled Tahiri in for another one-armed hug, the younger woman curled up against her side, shaking as she let the tears fall.

Jaina kept her eyes closed, breathing ragged as she tried to send through their bond as much support as she possibly could. She had meant what she said during her hissed lecture. The only reason why she was able to remain strong after losing Vale and half of her squadron was because she knew that others still needed her. She was the Sword of the Jedi, meant to protect her friends and family from as much pain as possible. She would be strong for everyone else around her, since their continued happiness and existence gave her all the strength she needed.
Tahiri focused on the warmth and comfort she was receiving, the guilt slowly subsiding. It was then that she noticed Jaina's rather red knuckles.
In a very small voice, Tahiri asked. "Did you get hurt in the fight too?"
Jaina held up her hand. "Oh, this? No this was after. I was a bit clumsy and banged by knuckles against something hard."
Banged my knuckles against the face of someone who believed you should have been one of the ones to die, Jaina thought bitterly, shielding that particular thought from Tahiri. The mood on the base was definitely hostile towards Tahiri, and after hearing some of the whispers, both Ganner and Zekk made it a point to try and draw as much attention from her as possible.
"Both hands?" Tahiri gestured to the similarly reddened knuckles of Jaina's opposite hand.
Jaina smiled faintly. "Yeah. I guess I was a bit tired after staying up all night."
On cue, Tahiri yawned. "I know what you mean."
"I talked with General Farlander, he's combining the squadrons affected by the attack. If you want, do you want to join Twin Suns?" Jaina said gently.
Tahiri nodded against her side.
"You'll be Lowie and Tesar's third, then," Jaina said, rubbing Tahiri's back.
"Sounds good, Lead," Tahiri mumbled.
"Come on then, we might be able to squeeze in a few hours of sleep before the maneuvers later this morning."
Managing a wan grin, Jaina wrapped an arm around Tahiri and brought the both of them to their feet.
Tahiri sighed for a moment, then stepped back; green eyes sparkling gratefully at the older Jedi. "Thank you."
"Any time, Tahiri," Jaina said softly.
Tahiri inhaled deeply, releasing the breath slowly. The fighting on the base may have ended a few hours ago, but the war was far from over.

She had been fortunate enough that she had even had the time she had to grieve and pity herself. But Nas Choka's fleet was almost two days away, and emotions had to be set aside for another time. "What time do I have to report for duty, Lead?"
Jaina glanced at the nearest clock and made a face. The sunlight streaming through the med-bay's windows made it clear that daylight had long since broken. "Three hours too soon?"
Tahiri shrugged. "Better than two."
"We're making it out of this war in one piece," Jaina part ordered.
"Understood," Tahiri nodded. She reached out with the Force so Jaina could see her resolve. They both looked around the busy med-bay, and Tahiri exhaled once more. "This war can't be over soon enough."
[o-o-[XII]-o-o]
"Returning to real space in five, four, three, two…" The blue glow which had been prevalent over Zonama Sekot for the better part of the past few weeks, finally subsided and gave way to the more natural expanse of stars high above. "Reversion successful."
"Looks like the newly grown link held up," Mara commented as she, the Jedi, and several of the high ranking Freed Yuuzhan Vong breathed sighs of relief.
"Stroking villip to Supreme Leader," Shaeri said professionally. The villip's ability to reach out to its counterpart across the galaxy was useful considering the unreliability of the HoloNet. With the villip, a connection was practically guaranteed and minimized communication problems. There was a brief pause, and then the villip in front of Shaeri took on Taan's face. "Supreme Leader, this is Shaeri, we have survived our hyperspace travel."
"That is good to hear. Where have you emerged?"
Shaeri looked to Nen Yim and the shapers. After some calculations, the information was supplied. "For a precise location, Nen Yem and the others say that we are somewhere between the Bilbringi and Reecee systems. Shall we proceed to Coruscant?"
"Please wait. Part of the taskforce that is to attack Coruscant is stationed at Bilbringi under the Imperial Remnant Supreme Commander Pellaeon. If you will allow them time to meet up with you, you can be better prepared should Shimrra have held any of his forces in reserve."
"We can do that," Shaeri said, confirming with Luke and the others.
"I've informed my counterparts on this end, expect the Imperial fleet in several hours time. Apart from this, is all in readiness?"
"Yes, Supreme Leader," Shaeri replied. "Zonama Sekot is eager to have her parent's children grace her with our presence and all preparations

for the conclusion of the war have already been made. It is now just a matter of how many will foolishly throw away their lives when the home we have sought after so long is provided to them."
"The attack on Mon Calamari is expected in a couple of days. Fleet groups are already in position throughout the Inner Rim, and now that we are aware of your location, they shall time their jumps to Coruscant accordingly."
"It is regrettable that our current distance from Coruscant will take us at least four days travel. Should Nas Choka attack with overwhelming force…"
"We will simply pray to the gods that we will be able to hold out for that period of time," Taan replied solemnly. *"May the Yun'o watch over and protect you."*
Shaeri bowed her head reverently, and the villip reverted to its cluster.
"Well," Jacen exhaled. "Once the Imperials get here. This will be it."
"Do you think the others will be alright?" Anakin looked to his aunt and uncle. He knew without a doubt that Jaina, Tahiri, and all the others would be in the thick of things. And once again he was unable to do a single thing about it. All he could do was trust in them and their skills and hope everything would turn out for the better.
"They'll be fine," Mara said, reassuring them all as she leaned against Luke. "After everything we've done for this galaxy, and the galaxy the Yuuzhan Vong are from, I'd say the Force owes us a few favors. Besides, we've all lasted this long through the war, what's another week compared to that?"
"The odds of making it through that week, considering the battles that still need to be fought, are extremely long against us," Nen Yim said practically. "And though I am aware of your Corellian saying about ignoring the odds, not all of us have that luxury. Blood *will* need to be shed before this war is over. That is the ironic price of peace after all."
[o-o-[Chapter End]-o-o]
A\N: Out of curiosity, is it bad form to blow up and slay your most loyal reviewers as thanks for their reviews? =). Hope Sabre, Sioux, and Boris (sorry for dropping an X-wing on your character!) enjoyed? their brief stint as Twin Suns pilots, and Draco, Buffy, and Caly as Barefoots! Anagrams are so fun. Next chapter, tomorrow, the Battle of Mon Calamari begins!

ADA 65

Sixty-Five

[o-o-[I]-o-o]

Jaina Solo's heart was pounding, and no amount of Jedi exercises could stop the anxiety she felt as she tightly held onto the steering column of her X-wing. This was it, the first phase of what was going to be the final battle of a four year war. Four years of running, hiding, fighting, of not knowing if the next day would be the last for her friends, her family, or herself. All the violence, death and destruction, it would soon be over.

"Twin Suns, final check-in. Let me know if there's a problem," Jaina breathed, only half –listening to the others report in. The sight of the dazzling array of stars at the edge of the Calamari system continued to wink innocently at her, but she knew it would only be a matter of time before that array was completely blotted out by the beast that was the Yuuzhan Vong war-machine.

As Ganner, as Twin Suns Twelve, finished off the check-in, Jaina activated the comm again. "Listen up. I don't need to tell you guys how important this is. Just do your best to stay alive, trust your shield-trio and the Force, and you'll get through this. Remember, we only need to delay the Yuuzhan Vong long enough for Anakin and the others to get Zonama Sekot into position, so only go all-out if you absolutely have to. We still have another battle to fight after this one. Other than that, it's an honor flying with you all, may the Force be with you."

The Twin Suns pilots all responded with supportive clicks of their comlinks, sitting in formation behind her X-wing. The squadron was made up of the survivors of the original Twin Suns and some of her closest friends and people she'd consider family. Tahiri, Ganner, Zekk, Tekli, Lowbacca, Kyp Durron—who had merged the survivors of his Dozen into the squad—were all flying at her side. In the meld, she could also feel Tenel Ka and Tekli lend their support, and the presences of her brothers resonated from a place deep within her as well. They'd been through much together, and it seemed only fitting that they would be ending this war together.

And the Twin Suns was just a single squadron among hundreds spread out just outside the orbit of the sixth planet in the system, Sep Elopon. Almost all of the preeminent squadrons from the Galactic Alliance were present; Rogue Squadron, Blue Squadron, Vanguard, Scimitar, Wild Knights, Death Knights, and more. They were a literal sheet of starfighters stretched out across the stars. A-Wings, B-Wings, E-Wings, X-Wings, even older Y-Wings brought out of mothballed fleets, sat in staggered formation in numbers and scale that had never before been seen.

But that was only a part of the massive fighter screen the defenders of Mon Calamari were employing.

Mixed in were squadrons of Freed Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers and blastboulders.
TIEs of all sorts—from the standard TIE, to the Interceptors, bombers, and the heavily shielded Raptors and Defenders—floated in a miniature armada all of their own.
Three full wings of Chiss Clawcrafts from the Household Phalanx flew in formation with the Remnant fighters, their claw-shaped crafts oddly at place amongst the other spherical-cockpit fighters.
And then there were multiple wings of the slant-winged Hapan Miy'til fighters and bombers, the unconventional TIE-influenced Twi'lek *chir'daki* fighters, P'w'eck *Swarm*-class battle droids, and Mandalorian Gladiator fighters, interspersed across the stars.
The numbers and size of such a fleet was nearly inconceivable to Jaina, and she never would have believed it possible to unite so many different parts of the galaxy unless she had seen it for herself. The fighter screen stretched out for several kilometers in orderly chevrons, columns, and square-formations, the defenders truly ready to take on whatever Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong had for them. Hundreds, thousands of pilots, massed for a single purpose; to end the war.
And that was just the fighter support.
Capital ships of all make and size, some nearly forty-years old, waited behind them; representing nearly every major power in the galaxy. Everything from Mandalorian *Keldabe*-class battleships and *Crusader-class* corvettes, to Hapan Nova and Beta cruisers, *Republic*-class light cruisers, Bakuran Destroyers, and multiple generations of Star Destroyers and Mon Calamari vessels, formed an impassable barrier between the outer edges of the system and the occupied planets at its core.
The Galactic Alliance also fielded a trio of awe-inspiring super-cruisers; the *Viscount*, a Star Defender, the *Guardian*, a Star Dreadnought, and the *Harbinger,* a heavy battle cruiser. Imperial Admiral Pryl led her fleet from the *Dominion*, another Star Dreadnought. While Tenel Ka was at the helm of the *Flames of Dathomir II*, a larger and upgraded version of the prototype Battle Dragon Han Solo had commanded from during the Battle of Hapes. Even the Freed Yuuzhan Vong had a super-cruiser of their own, the Korr Chokk that had been captured over Nal Hutta during the campaign to free Hutt Space.
It was as if the entire galaxy had put aside their differences and gathered together to defend not just Mon Calamari, but their very way of life, as diverse as it was.
The Jedi-meld was filled with the same anticipation and anxiety Jaina felt. There were even more Jedi present than there had been at Ebaq

Nine, fleshing out for Jaina the eventual battlefield in its entirety. Though the meld was lacking the very noticeable presences of her brothers and aunt and uncle, so strong was the meld already that Jaina could practically feel the Force in a tangible way. She could close her eyes and see one end of the fleet formation or another. *Know* what was happening kilometers away if she wanted to. Though there had been some fall-out from Alema and Anakin's actions in the Remnant, the Order still remained united in a way it had never been before. The thoughts of every Jedi in the meld, nearly a hundred, were loud and clear, harmonious even as everyone readied themselves and sought to support the others. Everyone had a purpose, everyone was dedicated to helping one and other make it through this coming fight. Regardless of personal beliefs or opinions, regardless of what had happened in the past, the dozens and dozens of Jedi were willing to fight alongside the diverse population of their allies and finally bring an end to the war. Jaina couldn't help but smile as her nerves got the better of her. *This* was what the Order had been missing. *This* is what Anakin and his crazy ideas had managed to accomplish. She doubted that the family-like atmosphere she sensed in the meld was anything like what had existed in the older order. They were definitely Jedi of the here-and-now, and this was their time to prove to themselves and the galaxy that they could make a difference.

She could feel her friends and family, could feel the definitiveness of the approaching battle. One way or another, everything was soon going to end.

[o-o-[II]-o-o]

One last short-ranged jump remained, Nas Choka closed his eyes, burning the image of the swirling array of ships around him into his mind. They were spread out many, many kilometers, spiraling around and orbiting his ship like planets would a sun. The sleek forms of miid ro'ik, yorik-vec, and Uro-Ik V'alh floated gracefully around his command ship. Squadrons of yorik-et, by the hundreds, swarmed all around the powerful Mataloks, like drones protecting a hive. The triangle forms of glossy black I'Frii Ma-Nat glinted as they danced around the ovoid A-vek Liluunu fighter carriers. Snaking through the fleet in an almost playful manner, massive ychna, capable of devouring entire space-stations, weaved to and fro. This was a representation of true Yuuzhan Vong might at its finest, and yet Nas Choka was still ill at ease.

The stakes could not have been higher, the price of failure too grim to fathom. He had at him the entirety of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, the hopes and dreams of his people. Entire systems had been left

unguarded, newly established colonies and garrisons emptied, millions upon millions of Yuuzhan Vong and other life gathered together for a singular purpose. If he failed to take the infidel capital, he would sign the death warrant for his race and the countless years of toil and suffering in the space between galaxies would have been for naught. The strength of the Yuuzhan Vong, the values that had enabled them to survive for so long, were what Nas Choka had been brought up to admire and respect. Without the strength, they had no identity. He was not so blind as to see the downsides of their society, but every society had its problems.

The 'Freed Ones' were an affront to everything Shimrra, their ancestors, and those who had died in the war, stood for. Those who died fought for a place to start anew, a home to call their own. There could have been no other reason for why the gods had brought them to the galaxy but to allow their children to claim it. They were Yuuzhan Vong, strength, honor, discipline, all of it forming the backbone of who they were. They had survived for so long without the *Jeedai*, were a single people for centuries. All the tradition that had enabled them to survive, the pride of being Yuuzhan Vong, the Freed Ones eagerly and willingly cast it aside. No longer were the gods their masters, but these alien *Jeedai,* who had succeed in dividing the Yuuzhan Vong when centuries of traveling had not.

Nas Choka had no desire to spill Yuuzhan Vong blood—already too many lives had been lost—but he knew that the misguided nature of the Freed Ones would force his hand, and it sickened him. Why couldn't the Freed Ones see that what they were doing was weakening the purity of the Yuuzhan Vong spirit? That the Yuuzhan Vong didn't have to be equals to anyone because they were a divine race, children of Yun-Yuuzhan and the Yun'o. Domains, Yuuzhan Vong, duty, they all meant something to Nas Choka. They were a symbol of pride, of unity. To have Domain members fighting each other, to have Yuuzhan Vong forget all that they had suffered together and attack one and other, it was almost inconceivable.

"Such a force has never been seen before. Between these numbers and your mind, the infidels do not stand a chance. " Nas Choka's Supreme Commander, Loiric Kaan*,* praised.

"Loiric Kaan, would confidence and words win battles, this war would have been over the moment it began," Nas Choka said coolly, opening his eyes and removing the cognition hood.

"But Warmaster, surely you do not think there is a chance of failure? Our entire fleet has gathered, ships from all reaches of the galaxy. No one has ever stood up against the combined might of our forces."

"Anything is possible, Loiric," Nas Choka said, tilting his head a fraction of a centimeter. "My predecessor thought that overwhelming firepower would also be the key to defeating our foe, I will not be making the same mistake. Not when the future of our race lies in my hands."
"This is your moment of triumph, Warmaster. Even the Supreme One himself will acknowledge your skills after this. Your name will be repeated by countless generations and…" The Supreme Commander stopped when Nas Choka held up a hand.
"I have done nothing yet, Supreme Commander. You speak of things that might not ever occur, of deeds that have yet to be accomplished. There is a reason why the infidels have lasted for so long against your vaunted might of the Yuuzhan Vong."
"They survived through their *machines* and trickery," Loiric spat. "And we have pushed them back all the way to the edges of this galaxy in spite of that."
Nas Choka's lip curled and he glowered at his subordinate. "If you wish to survive the coming battle, and any other fights after this, you had better understand the enemy better. An enemy we have been fighting for four years. I was not able to eliminate Kre'fey, push back their attack, and undo the damage Tsavong left in his wake, by thinking about the type of weapons the infidels deployed. Instead, I thought of *how* the infidels fought, *how* they employed our own biots against us, and *how* they would respond. I did not throw waves of warriors at the machines, knowing that the metal would eventually break under their weight; I treated the machines as predators that needed to be baited and exhausted. Think of their machines as living creatures if you must, if it will help you view the matter in more clarity. We are now bringing the entirety of our people into the very den of our enemy, we have committed all that can be committed for this battle. They have every bit to lose as we do and will behave like any cornered animal will. Do not think that because we are Yuuzhan Vong, the gods will grant us an easy victory, or even a victory that we will live to see. "
Loiric Kaan bowed his head. "Warmaster."
Nas Choka shook his head in response, clearly displeased. "Only time will tell if you've truly understood my words. Think on it as you give the fleet the order to depart. The Calamari system, and whatever destiny is in store for us, awaits us."
[o-o-[III]-o-o]
"All group and squadron leaders, be advised, the beast has arrived."
Jaina straightened in her cockpit at the sound of General Farlander's voice, doing her best to moisten her suddenly dry mouth. Though they were several dozen light-minutes out from Iceberg IV and the comet

known as Iceberg III, they were more than close enough to the edge of the system to actually *see* the arrival of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Dark shadows blotted out the field of stars in so great a number it was as if a part of the galaxy had been switched off. Rather than stop, the darkness continued to spread, like water pooling on the ground. One by one, the view of the stars adjacent to the center of the void began to disappear as the Yuuzhan Vong fleet continued to grow, and grow, and grow.

The alarm that sounded in the battlemeld jockeyed against the calm others were trying to project. Even the survivors of Coruscant, of Hapes and Ebaq Nine, had never seen a Yuuzhan Vong fleet this concentrated. It was as if the Yuuzhan Vong had several dozen ships for every one fielded by the Galactic Alliance forces and their allies. The inky blackness spread, slowly coalescing into a swirling spiral pattern, not unlike the galaxy they were trying to conquer. Tendril like arms reached out and spun about, almost beckoning the defenders forward as the fleet held their position on the outer edge of the galaxy.

"*That's a lot of ships,*" Tahiri whispered over a private channel.

"Yeah," Jaina managed, her stomach somewhere in the vicinity of her throat.

"Initiate Plan Oster-Hagan." The command went through the entire allied-fleet, and everyone seemed to hold their breaths as they focused on the ball of ice and rock that sat just off-center of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. *"Detonation in three, two, one..."*

A brilliant flash of light flared out from the outer edge of the system as Iceberg IV was ripped apart in a cataclysmic explosion that sent pieces of the planet careening through the completely caught-off-guard forces surrounding it. Dozens of capital ships were destroyed in an instant, many more colliding or receiving serious damage as the chunks of Iceberg IV sheered through the fleet. For several long minutes, the beautifully organized spiral-armed formation of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet broke apart as ships scattered in panic.

"Initiate Plan Zonama-Borosk," Farlander's voice held a note of triumph as he admired the results of the first plan.

As Plan Zonama was implemented, dozens of engines that had been installed on the back of Iceberg III—a small moon-sized comet—flared to life and shoved the tumbling ball of ice out of orbit and towards the Yuuzhan Vong fleet at breakneck speeds. Inspired by what Jaina and Tahiri had seen on Zonama Sekot, as well as by what the Imperials had experienced at the hands of Domain Vorrik, the idea to throw an entire comet at the Yuuzhan Vong fleet had gone over about as well as Hagan and Oster's plan had. Desperate times called for desperate

measures, and no military fleet would have enjoyed having a monster-sized comet hurled at it. Several of the old-timers had likened it to Ewoks throwing stones at walkers and stormtroopers. It may have been crude, but it had a high likelihood of succeeding.
With the yammosks of Shimrra's fleet still trying to regain control, and dovin basals thrown off by the sudden absence of Iceberg IV's gravity shadow, it was by sheer luck that the Yuuzhan Vong noticed the moon-sized rock bearing down on them. Then again, it was nearly impossible to miss a moon-sized rock with giant engines sticking out its back.
Immediately, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet opened fire, a blinding burst of plasma shredding the entirety of Iceberg III within seconds. Deathly silence filled the following few seconds, as the Yuuzhan Vong recovered from the losses inflicted on them by Iceberg IV and slowly closed their formation once more. Despite the initial appearances, and losing more ships than most governments would be able to afford, the explosion seemed to have done little to blunt the lethality of the invading fleet.
"Can't win them all," Ganner remarked, trying to keep his voice as light as possible. It was quite the challenge considering the destructive firepower everyone had just witnessed. Add to the fact that the Yuuzhan Vong fleet was now slowly advancing in the eerie synchronization provided by the yammosks, seemingly unscathed by the loss of an entire 'arm' of their formation, and it didn't seem like anything could hurt the massive beast bearing down on them.
As the fleet approached, Jaina's X-wing computer flared to life with a sudden influx of data and targeting solutions.
"Command, this is Twin Suns Leader, receiving the navigational and targeting data from droid intelligence."
"Nice to know that part of the plan worked out. Others relaying the same. Let's hope the beast doesn't smarten up."
Unbeknownst to the massive armada, thousands upon thousands of probe and other droid types had been seeded in the distance between the orbits of Iceberg IV and Sep Elopon. They were small enough, gave off minimal power signals, and no noticeable gravity field of their own so the enemy dovin basals and yammosks ignored them. Even if a couple dozen were dashed against the hull of the hulking cruisers, there were still many others that took their place.
The purposes of the black-painted droids were several-fold.
As the fleet passed by, probe droids quickly began tagging and analyzing the various fleet components that flew by them, marking the locations of capital ships, support vessels, and gaps in the formation. Once that was done, the droid would activate a set of systems causing

it to mimic the gravitational signal of a starfighter. The droids then tracked the shifts in fleet formation as coralskippers or yorik-kor crews targeted them, relaying the attack-behavior of the vessels shortly before its own demise.
There were also thousands of YVH-1 and YVH-2 type battle droids strewn about the space, looking little more than floating pieces of debris to the untrained eye. They were in sleep-mode, with proximity sensors that activated them the moment a ship flew past. Giving off no life-signs or energy signatures of their own, they were the perfect 'sleeper' army. Like grutchin, they would reach out and grab onto the nearest Yuuzhan Vong vessel that flew by, with priority targets being the larger cruisers and frigates. As the battle began, the battle droids would board the vessel they were on and cause as much havoc as they possibly could, before detonating their power-cores for a climatic finish.
The seconds crawled by as data continued to flow into Jaina's computer. Attack strategies and responsibilities were doled out accordingly, with the Twin Suns and several other squadrons being assigned the arm-like tendrils of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet designated fourteen through twenty. As one, the sheet of fighters defending Mon Calamari began to split up, shifting their positions as the assignments were handed down.
The enemy fleet was now only a couple of light minutes away.
"*This is Control to all forces. Good luck, and may the Force, gods, and any other supreme power you believe in, be with you,*" General Farlander said solemnly. *"Fighter squadrons, you may begin your attack runs now."*
[o-o-[IV]-o-o]
Twenty capital ships lost, dozens of support ships in ruin, nearly two hundred yorik-et destroyed. That was the toll inflicted upon them by the trickery employed by the Galactic Alliance. But to Nas Choka, those numbers meant far more. Onboard the ships that had been lost, over sixty-thousand Yuuzhan Vong would no longer be able to see the future they had given their lives for. Sixty-thousand lives, the entire population of several Domains and parts of several others, gone in a single instant. And the battle still had yet to truly begun.
"The infidels are surely desperate to sacrifice an entire planet. If that is all that their minds can conjure up, this battle will be done in no time. Even with our losses, we still outnumber them," Loiric Kaan said confidently.
Nas Choka rubbed at his brow, in annoyance. Glancing at a nearby subaltern he snapped his fingers and gestured impatiently. "Escort

Supreme Commander Loiric Kaan from the command chamber. He evidently needs much more time to reflect on what I have told him."
The Warmaster kept his back turned to Kaan as he was led to the chamber's iris membrane.
"The number of ships is significantly lower than calculated," Nas Choka's chief tactician said, when the membrane resealed itself.
"Of course," Nas Choka said calmly. "This battle is every bit the gambit for them as it is for us."
"They mean to attack Yuuzhan'tar in our absence?"
"That is a likely possibility," Nas Choka said smoothly. "Our agents within the heretic movement have indeed noted ships massing at Contruum and Bilbringi."
"What of the reports that those ships were massing for attacks on Toong'l and Caluula?"
"Just that, reports," Nas Choka replied. "Remember this well. The last few battles were not one by number of vessels of firepower at one side's disposal, but by intelligence and skillful positioning of one's assets. Tsavong failed because he did not understand that the nature of the war had changed, evolved if you will, as the enemy became more and more familiar with our tactics."
"Your orders, then, Warmaster?" the female subaltern attending the villips asked.
"Inform the Domain groups Shen'g, Eklut, Paasar, and Taav. They are to separate from the armada and return to dark space."
"To Yuuzhan'tar, Warmaster?" the female officer said.
"There is some hope for you yet," Nas Choka nodded once in confirmation. He then returned his attention back to the battle at hand. "Have all yorik-et accelerate to attack speed. The infidels wish us to come to them, and so we will."
Outside of his command cruiser *Yammka's Mount*, thousands of coralline fighters swarmed into formation. Many were manned by pilots barely old enough to be breeding partners, as both skill and experience were not truly necessary with the yammosks controlling their every move. It was also a sign of just how hard the war had hit the Yuuzhan Vong population, as there were truly no other older warriors to fill their places. But young or old, all the warriors from birth had sworn to serve the Yun'o, the Yuuzhan Vong, and the Supreme Overlord. And they were on the verge of a great honor, participating in the battle that would destroy the enemy capital and end the war.
These thousands of coralskippers formed up in front of the capital ships, acting as the claws and talons of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet.

Nas Choka took in one breath, and then exhaled it. How many more of his people would die for this war to be over? He put on his cognition hood and closed his eyes. "May the gods look upon us favorably. Subaltern, give the order to attack."

[o-o-[V]-o-o]

Like two opposing, seemingly unending waves, the two sides met in a furious exchange of laser, plasma, and missile fire. Entire squadrons on both sides of the battle disappeared within the first few seconds of engagement.

Nimble A-wings, Clawcrafts, Freed Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers, and TIE Defenders darted about in a deadly game of tag, matching the maneuverability and skills of Shimrra's pilots at speeds only they could manage.

The heavy hitting Miy'til, Raptor, and X-wing fighters swooped about, giving back as good as they got as they made up in firepower what they lacked in speed. They twisted and turned, specially coordinated laser bursts chewing away at coral as dovin basals failed to deploy in time.

And then the picketships and anti-fighter frigates on both sides got involved, flooding the already crowded space with sheets of blazing energy. With their involvement came the heavy bombers and blastboulders, peeking out from behind their cover to launch their payloads at anything that didn't register as friendly on their targeting computers. Proton torpedoes, heavy rockets, and magma projectiles streamed across the battlefield, deafening explosions silenced by the vacuum of space consuming fighters and support ships alike.

Jaina squeezed the trigger on her steering column for what had to be the hundred time in a matter of seconds, watching as her lasers combined with that of her shield-trio to vaporize a particularly aggressive coralskipper. There were so many coralskippers surrounding her, so many targets, that she felt as if she was in some unbelievable simulation program than in an actual battle. And this was just in one single tendril of the beast that was the Yuuzhan Vong war-machine. Wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead, she took a brief moment to glance down at her read-out.

"We have clear firing lanes to their capital ships at one, six, seven, eight, and twelve. All fighters in those lanes reposition to escort carriers," Jaina ordered, following the designations given to her by the probe droids. "Iron Knights, now's the time to activate any of your buddies who managed to get aboard."

"Roger, Colonel Solo. Activating YVH commando units now," Illum reported from aboard the Iron Knight's Star Dreadnaught.

"Wild Knights, Vanguard, Blackmoons, Rogues, Twin Suns has point," Jaina rattled off as multiple squadrons looped out of the scrum and fell into position alongside the Super Star Destroyer *Guardian,* the *Flames of Dathomir II,* and Freed Yuuzhan Vong Kor Chokk. Freed Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers that had been held in reserve, flew down to join them, and the wedge-shaped formation lead by the three behemoths began blasting their way through the firing lane.

Vessels in Shimrra's fleet succumbed to the awe-inspiring barrage of death and destruction in a matter of seconds. No dovin basal was strong enough to withstand such a beating, and explosions blossomed out from the center of the armada. Burnt coral flew everywhere as ship after ship wilted under the combined barrage of three super cruisers and their escorts.

Several Mataloks moving in to assist, succumbed to a series of internal explosion all on their own, breaking apart before the Galactic Alliance forces even had a chance to fire on them. The YVH battle droids continued to wreak havoc on the ships within the tendril-like arm of the enemy fleet, decimating bridge crews, shooting apart dovin basals, blasting breaches in vital portions of the ship. Just like a grutchin would chew apart a starfighter from within, the YVH droids were launching devastating surprise raids on the vessels they had boarded.

All across the enemy fleet, like wolves nipping at their heels, the tendril arms of Nas Choka's fleet recoiled and shuddered under a concerted push by the Galactic Alliance forces.

"Twin Suns, switch target. Cruiser designated twenty-five," Jaina directed. The sleek line of twelve X-wing wove through the countless projectiles and debris flying through space and lined up their sights on a Yuuzhan Vong light-cruiser. Setting the throttle to full, Jaina and the other Twin Suns screamed down at the ovoid ship, quad-laser cannons blazing. The voids of the cruiser held up a little better than the coralskippers they had been going up against, but it couldn't endure the synchronized attacks of the mostly-Jedi, well-trained pilots that made up Jaina's squadron. Chunks of coral were blown away, and a single torpedo to the exposed insides of the vessel ripped it to shreds.

"Nice one, new target, frigate five." Jaina called out.

"*Neg that!"* Tahiri's voice, full of panic, filled the comlines on a general frequency. *"All Galactic Alliance ships get clear of the firing lanes now! I repeat, get clear of the firing lanes!"*

The Twin Suns' trust in Tahiri had them all immediately follow her orders. Everyone else was not as fortunate.

Just when it seemed like the beast that was the Yuuzhan Vong armada would collapse under a sudden surge, the ships at the tips of the

tendril unexpectedly gave up their positions and made a full withdraw towards the sun-burst center of the formation. This left the Galactic Alliance attack force completely open and facing the united front of the Yuuzhan Vong armada. Before anyone could react, a wall of fire and plasma was belched out from the thousands of ships Nas Choka had to bear. Furious storms of fire raged through the void of space and down the devastated firing lines as the entirety of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet focused their fire on a single set of coordinates.

The effect was instantaneous and disastrous for the defenders of the Calamari system.

The prow of the *Guardian* had several large holes blown directly through the dozens of decks that made up its triangular form, and the upper corner of its bridge tower was awash in flame. The Mon Calamari heavy cruiser, the *Harbinger,* was cored from front end to back by the same barrage that had annihilated Iceberg III, a gaping and glowing wound where metal and thousands of people had once been. Whole swaths of starfighters, many dozen at a time, were atomized in a single instant. It was as if Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong had set the very fabric of space ablaze with a ceaseless torrent of molten liquid. When the barrage was done, the entire galaxy-like formation of Nas Choka's fleet swirled around, presenting the shell-shocked defenders with a fresh set of ships, fighters, and warriors.

Though the defenders had had no problem in the initial fighter-to-fighter dogfights, they were no longer as numerous or as organized as before. Where there had once been only a squadron or two of enemy coralskippers left to fight off, they now had to contend with dozens of new squadrons. That wasn't the worst of it. The snubfighters that specialized in dogfight—the A-wings, Defenders, and Clawcraft—had been at the front of the attack and taken the brunt of the outpouring of flame. There wasn't much of them left apart from a few melted blobs of metal floating amongst deathly still stretches of space. Those that made it through were in no condition to engage the fresh set of alien fighters now bearing down on them. The extra enemy fighters pounced on the stunned Galactic Alliance pilots, with some coralskippers completely bypassing them and moving on to ram into the bridges of the equally ravaged cruisers and support vessels. In the span of several seconds, Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong paid back their losses in triplicate, downing Galactic Alliance ship after ship.

And before the Galactic Alliance and their allies could overcome their shock, the giant creatures known to the Yuuzhan Vong as ychna, snaked their way out from the center of the Yuuzhan Vong formation. One of them braved the blistering turbolasers of the *Guardian* and

snaked its way around the bridge tower. To the horror of those looking on, its great gaping maw opened wide and proceeded to smash through the bridge's viewing bay.
Several escorting Star Destroyers were set upon by the giant, armored space-snakes, which were about the same size as the capital ships they were charging. An *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer had its bridge tower completely ripped off by undulating coils of muscle. A *Nebula*-class cruiser was render in two as the ychna plowed right through its docking bay and out the other side. Missiles and lasers were expended on the rampaging behemoths, allowing time for other Yuuzhan Vong vessels to draw near and add their molten arsenals to the damage created by the terror-causing ychna.
The last straw for Jaina was when a pair of ychna targeted Tenel Ka's *Flames of Dathomir II*, snarling and hissing as the flagship's fast-fire lasers burned great bubbling welts in their serpentine form. The ychnas' thick black scales, however, ablated most of the damage, and the flagship of the Hapan fleet was forced into a hasty withdraw.
Sensing Tenel Ka's alarm in the Force, Jaina grit her teeth angrily. No ship-eating monstrosity was going to devour her friend on her watch. Her squadron, saved from most of the damage by Tahiri's Vongsense-enhanced warning, quickly fell into position. They had been fortunate not to lose any to the startling counter-attack, but their fighters still were a bit more charred than was healthy.
"Queen Mother, come about at point four-nine," Jaina said tersely. "I can take those things out but I need your help lining up my shot."
"Understood," Came Tenel Ka's tense reply. Though her relative lack of emotion was the norm for her, she had every right to be tense when a giant space-snake wanted to eat her ship with her in it.
As the Battle Dragon veered sharply, bringing the two ychna directly into the path of the Twin Suns; Jaina, Tahiri, Zekk, and the rest all released a volley of torpedoes. It was a tense few seconds as the torpedoes streaked through space. The Battle Dragon's maneuver had caused the ychna to gain on their quarry. One snake went high, aiming for the upper segment of the Battle Dragon, and the other went low to chomp down on the lower disc of the ship. The moment the jaws opened, however, six torpedoes flew into each. Not even heavily armored, space-station eating, space snakes could survive being blown apart from the inside.
"Hapes sends its thanks," Tenel Ka said shortly, her ship covered in frozen ychna remains.
"Any time," Jaina breathed weakly.

Despite the small victory, the tendrils of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet were now trying to wrap around the scattered, battered, and disorientated defenders.
"All units....fall back ...Mon Eron. Repeat...back to Mon Eron," the message from control crackled over Jaina's damaged comm-sytem.
"A little late for that," Tahiri's ragged and tired voice followed on their private channel.
Nas Choka's fleet had pressed its advantage, blowing away ship after ship as smaller spiral-armed units of its main fleet broke off to engage their respective targets. The Yuuzhan Vong had almost always had a numerical advantage when they attacked, and now it looked as if they had the right minds to make that advantage work for them. Though the call to retreat to Mon Eron, the fifth planet in the system, was good for those who could make it. The more heavily damaged fleet elements, such as the Twin Suns and the *Habinger*, had little hope of rejoining the others.
The commander of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong Kor Chokk quickly saw the gravity of the situation and the pride and joy of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong fleet promptly abandoned its retreat and interspersed itself between the damaged defenders and the overwhelming onslaught.
"*Group and squadron leaders, go, we shall cover your retreat,"* a modified villip broadcasted to the nearby vessels.
Dry-mouthed, Jaina watched as a majority of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong fleet likewise halted their withdraw and rallied around the Korr Chokk. They didn't stand a chance of winning, or even surviving, against the impossible odds they faced, but the Freed Yuuzhan Vong vessels continued to form up a new line anyway.
In the meantime, damaged frigates, fighters, cruisers, ships of all sorts began to use the most of the time they were given.
"*Jaina,"* Tahiri whispered as a Freed Yuuzhan Vong Matalok disappeared in a blazing ball of flame.
"They'll be remembered, Tahiri," Jaina whispered back. "They damn well better be."
The Freed Yuuzhan Vong continued their act of defiance, forcing Nas Choka's fleets to destroy them all to the last man. Ship after ship were reduced to shattered hulks, coralskippers on both sides moving so fast it was hard to tell which one was allied to which side.
The mass retreat continued, with every Freed Yuuzhan Vong ship falling saving thousands of others aboard ships that would have cut-off had they not mounted their holding action.
As the Twin Suns finally made it back to the safety of their lines, the Kor Chokk finally succumbed to the firepower of Nas Choka's fleet, and

the remaining Freed Yuuzhan Vong vessels fell in short order. Silence once again fell as the battle lines were re-established. Yet Nas Choka's fleet didn't advance any further.
"*Not that I'm not grateful for the break, but any idea why they stopped?"* Zekk asked.
"*Say you just had to kill thousands of your own people for choosing to live a different life than you, how would that make you feel?"* Kyp Durron replied solemnly. The Jedi meld, having shrunk drastically since the start of the battle, seemed to sober at his words.
"*This is Control, receiving a fleet-wide broadcast from the enemy commander."*
"*Really?"* Several people said in disbelief.
"*Hear it for yourself."*
In even tones, a slightly accented voice began speaking in Basic.
"*Defenders of this system, I am Warmaster Nas Choka. As a sign of my respect for you, I will grant you a single hour to retrieve any wounded and dead you may have left behind in your retreat. Any act of aggression will void this offer. Once that hour is up, you will be given a chance to flee this system to a location of your choosing. You have seen what you are up against, you are outnumbered and have already lost far more ships than I have. Tend to your injuries and think my offer over. Any who wish to leave will have my word that you will be allowed to do so unmolested. I was able to deduce your secondary objective, that of Yuuzhan'tar, and have already dispatched portions of my fleet to intercept the ships you have undoubtedly sent. No more lives need be lost today on either side. I have offered you a way out, whether this battle will continue is solely of your own discretion. Your fate is in your hands."*
[o-o-[VI]-o-o]
Nas Choka finished the transmission and slumped back in his command chair, rubbing his face and feeling a weariness that had nothing and everything to do with the battle.
"Warmaster?" A subaltern seemed surprise at the fatigue his leader was showing. "Warmaster, are you ill?"
"I am fine. All of you are to leave this room and return when the deadline I have set has passed," Nas Choka said coolly.
Without question, the advisors, villip operators, and blazebug trackers rose from their station and filed out of the command room. When the iris-like membrane sealed shut behind them, Nas Choka very slowly stood. Robotically, he moved to the transparent viewing area, gazing out at the countless pieces of burnt ship and coral that floated by. He

was nearing a victory, yet a part of him dreaded it. This was no battle, it was a slaughter. Yet it was a necessary slaughter, wasn't it?
He exhaled through clenched teeth, just staring out at the distant ships and debris. His thoughts were not thoughts any warrior should be having. His resolve in serving Shimrra, for doing what was best for his race, should be unwavering. But as the remains of one of the heretical Yuuzhan Vong ships drifted and twirled about the remains of one of his own ships, he found that resolve weakening. How was killing his own people best for their race? It certainly wasn't a rooting out of the weak, or a culling of those who dared blaspheme against the gods as some would say it was. Nas Choka wasn't quite sure what to think. He had a duty to do, yet his duty meant pressing an attack that would get more Yuuzhan Vong killed.
Dying for the gods? For Yuuzhan'tar? It was a nice thought when one had nothing to lose but one's own life. So what were the heretics dying for? Why had they so eagerly, so resolutely, and so great in number, moved into the path to protect the Galactic Alliance vessels? He had seen from the way the ships had moved, and from the delay in the actions of those they had shielded, knew that the heretics had received no orders to immolate themselves against his fleet. The heretics had taken the initiative, had willingly died for alien races in a distant galaxy, for their strange way of life. With their backs turned towards the gods and everything the Yuuzhan Vong stood for.
It was madness. It made no sense.
It was almost as inconceivable as Shimrra's confusing insistence that the fleet attack Mon Calamari. There had still been countless systems to safeguard, colonies to establish, ships to grow. Why rush everything in this single attack? The infidels had proved hardy enough to withstand the loss of their capital before. Had even suffered drastic losses, but somehow bounced back. If Shimrra had truly wanted to end the war on favorable terms, he would have presented a long-term plan that would eventually bring the entire galaxy to his heel.
The Warmaster pressed a hand to the transparent membrane, his heart and mind conflicted. He was the Warmaster, leader of his people's armed forces. Feared for his deeds, and someone all warriors looked to emulate. He was Shimrra's amphistaff, the safeguard for all that had been accomplished thus far. Yet, after years of warring, they didn't appear to be any better off than they were at the start of the war. In fact, the galaxy they were in was beginning to resemble in very negative ways, the galaxy they had left. He was a warmaster, but war was something this galaxy, its people, and the Yuuzhan Vong, could scarcely endure for much longer. Would they even be capable of

rebuilding the galaxy after all the damage that had been inflicted upon it?
Questions, doubts, whispers, Nas Choka breathed roughly as he tried to shut them out. He knew in his heart that the battle may have been won physically. But mentally and spiritually, it was a complete loss. There was no honor in slaying heretics who so honorably sacrificed themselves. There was no honor in this mass slaughter that he knew would commence once his time limit had expired. He knew that the defenders wouldn't flee, wouldn't yield. His people had already developed a reputation for slaying and sacrificing their prisoners anyways. Both sides were set in their ways, and would bring the galaxy down with them defending those ways.
Something had to change.
Someone had to change.
The Warmaster curled his hands into fists and turned his gaze away from the viewing membrane. There just had to be another way, a way to preserve what it meant to be Yuuzhan Vong, to have a home and a place to belong, but at the same time avoid the deaths that were only fractions of a time measurement away. For all of his tactical brilliance, for all of the battles and experiences he had gained throughout his life, Nas Choka wracked his mind for an answer, but could think of nothing. After four years of warring, there would be no winner. That much was clear. Just survivors in power, forced to clean up after all those years of violence, and survivors whose lives were just as ruined and devastated. Nas Choka already lost the desire to fight the battle any further. But he had to. He was Shimrra's Warmaster, and his people looked to him for strength and leadership.
The sooner the battle was over, the quicker the thoughts tormenting him would leave him be. Once the war was over, it was not his place to say who was right and who was wrong, or if the price was worth it. All he was supposed to do was follow Shimrra's orders, achieve a victory, and go on to live his simple, uncomplicated life of absolutes.
Nas Choka was unaware just how much time had passed as he reflected on the situation, but before he knew it, the iris-membrane door opened and the command center's crew re-entered.
"Warmaster, it is time," a subaltern said.
Nas Choka slowly made his way back to his chair, sitting down slowly as if his joints ached. With one last calming breath, he folded his hands in front of him and nodded. "And so it is. Assemble the fleet in attack formation once more. It is doubtful the infidels will surrender."
"As you command, Warmaster."
[o-o-[VII]-o-o]

"*The break was nice while it lasted*," a tired-sounded Ganner quipped as they watched the Yuuzhan Vong fleet once again stir back into its spiral-armed formation. The battered Galactic Alliance fleet did its best to reform its own shattered lines, but it had lost a third of its strength in that single engagement alone. The odds did not look good at all.
"We still have to hold out for at least another twenty standard hours," Jaina said, feeling as tired as Ganner sounded. "Or whenever those brothers of mine transplant Zonama Sekot into Coruscant's orbit."
"Twenty hours is nothing. We just have to avoid getting our butts kicked so spectacularly in the near future," Kyp chimed. *"This is what happens when you don't schedule one regularly, they creep up on you when you least expect it."*
"We're scheduling out butt-kicking now?" Zekk said, going along with the others for the sake of lightening a very grim mood.
"Yup," Kyp said. *"It's something we older Jedi have become masters at. It keeps life interesting. How about another butt-kicking in eighteen hours or so?"*
"*Eighteen iz no good,*" Tesar objected. *"That is a bad number for uz Barabels. If our buttz are to be kicked then, this one will most likely be joining the Force."*
"We can make it a few minutes before that twenty-hour minimum," Jaina added. Then, quoting Kyp, "You know, to 'keep life interesting.'"
"This is High Command, Nas Choka is broadcasting once more." Came the report, shortly before the Warmaster's familiar accent-tinted Basic filled the air.
"Defenders of this system, your time is up. All those who wish to retreat to darkspace, may. All those who stay, will die. That is all."
None of the defenders moved from their position.
As one, the Yuuzhan Vong armada resumed its forward progress. Wave upon wave of coralskippers were released once more, escorted by a blastboulder and picketship analog protective screen. Instead of streaming out to meet them, the defenders remained where they were. They were content to let the enemy close the gap for more than one reason.
It was true that the pilots and crew serving onboard the defending vessels were tired and demoralized from the battering they had received. But that was not the primary reason. When the attack-plans were drawn up, it was decided that the Yuuzhan Vong would pay dearly for every planetary body they advanced to. Iceberg IV had Oster-Hagan, Icerberg III had Zonama-Borosk, and now Sep Elopon had a completely invisible minefield.

Plans courtesy of top-secret Imperial work done during the Rebellion era, thousands of cloaked mines lay in a very deadly web from Sep Elopon to Mon Eron. A minefield that hundreds of coralskippers, blastboulders, and picket-ships were currently streaming through. Jaina felt a twinge of guilt come across the meld from Tahiri, and mentally agreed with the younger teen. The Yuuzhan Vong in those ships didn't even have a chance.

As nearly a thousand enemy vessels began to close the gap between Sep Elopon and Mon Eron, the minefield was switched on. In a single instant, an almost living blaze reached out around the enemy formation and annihilated all that was caught within its fiery grasp. The rest of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet reacted instantaneously, aided by the cool emotion of their yammosks to temper the livid disbelief of what had just occurred. Again multiple swirls broke away from the main group to form their own mini-galaxies. Entire Domains, ships of all sorts, began to unleash a barrage of plasma the moment they came within firing distance. Despite losing a sizable number of their fighter-support, the armada continued to press on.

"Ready for another run, you guys?" Jaina said, trying to sound lively as they squadron once again began its deadly dance with death.

"As long as we don't end up on the wrong side of a plasma storm again," Ganner X-wing from another squadron was hit by a lucky shot and crumpled into pieces of superheated debris. *"Though we're not exactly starting off on the right track."*

"*Hey, on the bright side, if we lose this planet, we still have two more to go before we get to Mon Cal,"* Tahiri said.

"*Vong-Girl, I don't know about you, but I'd rather <u>not</u> get my butt kicked from one side of this system to the other,"* Zekk said wryly. "*We Jedi are used to being the galaxy's punching bag, but we have feelings too, you know."*

"Twin Suns, this is General Farlander. You'll be teaming up with the Hapans this time around. Your assignments should be reaching your astromechs now."

"Orders received," Jaina replied, and then switched frequencies. "Your Majesty, we're at your disposal."

"We are making an attack run on the trio of Matalok at the following coordinates. They are being supported by a myriad of other vessels. Your assistance would be appreciated," Tenel Ka returned.

"Affirmative."

The surviving members of the Hapan Royal Fleet flew into position all around the Twin Suns. More X-wings and Miy'til fighters, the swift and nimble Beta cruisers, and several Battle Dragons with their *Nova*-class

battle cruiser escort zoomed in. They formed the sharp portion of the scalpel-like formation the Hapans were moving with, allowing the Twin Suns and the Queen Mother to be the very tip of the blade.
The scalpel met swirling mini-galaxy, blade to the flat-side of the enemy formation.
The Hapans and the Twin Suns dug in deep, and didn't stop until they had severed arteries and bone. Beta cruisers flitted about the slower Yuuzhan Vong frigates, blasting apart sections of ship from one angle, and then another. *Nova*-class battle cruisers exchanged broadsides with Uro-Ik V'alh battleships, each refusing to give an inch even as deck plating and coral began filling the fiery void between them. As the Matalok trio's escorts became bogged down in the renewed Hapan assault, Tenel Ka led her Battle Dragon compliment, and the Twin Suns, directly towards their goal. What few coralskippers that had stayed behind to defend their motherships were downed by the ever-efficient efforts of Jaina's squadron. And then the real plasma and laser barrages began. As strong a fight as the Mataloks put up, the Battle Dragons simply had more guns, and could shoot a lot faster than the plasma cannons the Yuuzhan Vong ships could bring to bear.
After a few minutes of intense fighting, the Hapan fleet streamed ahead. In their wake was the shattered remains of the Yuuzhan Vong taskforce. But in front of them were two more mini-galaxy clusters of Yuuzhan Vong ships, and these ones were a lot bigger than the one they had just slogged through.
The new Yuuzhan Vong taskforces wasted little time in engaging the Hapan fleet, determined to avenge their fallen brethren. Embroiled against much greater odds, and out of position, the Hapans fought tooth and nail to just survive the latest engagement.
Jaina grimaced as a nearby explosion rattled her fighter and sent one of her S-foils spiraling away. "Cappie, reroute power to the shields."
Her astromech squealed in protest.
"Look, it's not my fault I'm an attractive target and they keep shooting out my shields."
The astromech squawked again.
"And yes, I'm well aware that you're on this fighter too and don't want to end up at a recycling plant," Jaina sent her X-wing spinning as she tried to shake an entire squadron of coralskippers. A quick check of her surrounding area revealed that all Twin Suns members were likewise occupied with their own problems. "Okay, forget the shields. Just give me everything you have to the engines. Laser, shields, everything."
There was an audible whine behind Jaina as her engines received more energy than they were normally equipped to handle. She let out

several deep breaths as she immersed herself in the Force. "Let's see just how good a pilot these guys are."
Jaina pushed her fighter to its very limits as she bounced to a fro in the cockpit, held in place solely by her safety-harness. They spun around battle cruisers engaged in heated combat, flashing through laser barrages between the milliseconds it took for the weapons to cycle. Three coralskippers were unable to time their pass right and vanished in a hail of tree-trunk sized laser beams. Another couldn't pull up in time and ended up splattering itself against the side of one of its own cruisers.
Jaina continued on, red-lining many of the systems in her heavily abused fighter. Coordinating through the Force with Tahiri, their two X-wings passed within millimeters of each other, both with their pursuit hot on their tails. Most of the coralskippers managed to veer away from each other, but two chasing Jaina collided with another two chasing Tahiri, and reduced themselves to floating hulks of crumpled coral.
And still Jaina flew, dodging and weaving the ceaseless barrage of plasma shot out from the remnants of the squadron chasing her. Another S-foil tumbled away as she set a new course towards several Yuuzhan Vong frigates. The frigate's own plasma cannons tracked up to meet her. Using the knowledge she was receiving from Tahiri's enhanced Vongsense, Jaina knew just when those cannons would open fire. At the very last second, Jaina jammed her steering column forward and dove. The plasma from the frigate plowed into the coralskippers hot on her tail, with neither the gunnery crew nor the pilots able to adjust their course in time.
Another pair of coralskippers down.
As her engines began to melt in their housings, Jaina decided to finally end the deadly game of tag she was in. Initiating a breakneck turn, Jaina nearly tore her own fighter apart as the inertial dampeners attempted to compensate for the G-forces being pulled. Only the Force allowed her to remain conscious as the pressure on her body reached very dangerous levels. The sudden maneuver had the benefit of catching the coralskippers chasing her completely off-guard, and the torpedo she fired detonated square in the center of the formation. The last of the squadron was vaporized by energy and shrapnel, the burnt-out husks spiraling out of control and away.
Unfortunately, that was only a single squadron. As Jaina regained her bearings, her eyes tracked three more forming up to take her on. A sinking feeling filled her stomach. Her fighter was barely holding together as it was, there was no way she'd be able to do a repeat

performance, especially with the larger audience. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw one of the Twin Suns eject from his X-wing as it disintegrated under a barrage of plasma. Another damaged fighter, belonging to Tesar, streaked pass with flames engulfing its engines. All around them, the Hapan fleet was slowly being picked apart, the numbers of the Yuuzhan Vong proving superior once more.
Suddenly, an array of gleaming white vessels lanced into the system from out of nowhere, practically on top of the beleaguered Hapans and Twin Suns. A barrage of green and blue assailed the Yuuzhan Vong as swarms and swarms of Clawcraft poured down. The coralskippers forming up on Jaina were mercilessly picked apart within the blink of an eye, and many other Yuuzhan Vong vessels were shredded.
"*This is Assistant Syndic Jagged Fel of the Chiss Ascendancy, might we provide some assistance?"* Jag's very welcome voice filled the comm-channels.
Jaina let out a whooping laughter of disbelief and joy. "You're late, Assistant Syndic!"
"I was delayed. Chiss disagreements are very…trying," Jag replied drolly, even as the Chiss fleet he had brought began finishing off the two Yuuzhan Vong taskforces that had engaged the Hapans. The sleek triangular forms of many Chiss Star Destroyers, escorted by frigates, picketships, and a swarm of gunboats, pushed on, acting as an umbrella for the battered Hapans and Twin Suns.
"Your boyfriend definitely knows how to make an entrance," Tahiri laughed, her very burnt and damaged fighter coming up alongside Jaina's.
Jaina allowed herself to relax in her seat as several squadrons of Clawcraft took up a protective formation around the Twin Suns.
"Thanks for coming Assistant Syndic. We still have to hold out for at least another nineteen hours." Four more mini-galaxies were dispatched from the center of the Yuuzhan Vong armada, which hadn't appeared to have shrunk at all despite the losses it had taken. "Hope you're ready for one heck of a drawn out fight."
[o-o-[VIII]-o-o]
"Are we there yet?" the Ferroan girl Tescia, the real one and not Sekot in disguise, asked, tugging on Anakin's sleeve.
"Almost," Anakin smiled. He bent down and picked her off the ground so she could be at eye-level with the array of different displays. Most of the computer tech had been brought to the planet by the reinforcements from Bilbringi. "See those squiggly lines?"
"Uh huh," Tescia nodded, reaching out a finger to touch the glowing screen.

"Well, we're traveling on that one," Anakin gestured to the line that represented the Namadii Corridor. "And we're right there at the moment. We want to get over here."
Tescia looked to the blinking planets. "We're really close."
Anakin set her back down. "Yup, you should probably return to your shelter. The Far Outsiders waiting for us won't all be as friendly as the ones you have met."
Tescia nodded and quickly scampered back through the underground tunnel.
"Hyperspace reversion in one hour," a technician announced. "Bilbringi fleet reporting no problems."
"Well, Jaina and the others are in for a fight for their lives," Jacen said, resisting the urge to pace impatiently as he stared at the read-outs.
"Yeah," Anakin nodded grimly. Through his bond with Tahiri, he could sense that she had been hurt to some extent, but didn't know the details. The closer they got to Coruscant, the stronger the bond became, which was both a curse and a blessing. The closeness meant that he was in a better position to send her his strength and support. It also meant that he could feel the flashes of panic and pain as his girlfriend fought against what seemed like an insurmountable force.
"Sekot, is there no way you can go any faster?"
"Never thought I'd see the day when my nephew asks a planet to go faster," Mara said under her breath as Sekot appeared in the form of the Ferroan magister.
"I could, but then the strain would begin to damage the planet's surface," Sekot replied evenly. "Keeping the fleet that arrived earlier within my electromagnetic shell is challenging enough as it is."
"Just wondering," Anakin breathed.
"When we arrive, Sekot, we're probably going to face whatever defenders Shimrra had stay behind," Jacen said. "Self-defense is okay, but please let the rest of us handle the main attack."
"You fear me going 'dark'?" Sekot-Jabitha seemed to smile in amusement.
"Not me, for the sake of my uncle and aunt," Jacen pointed to Luke and Mara. "They have enough on their minds already."
"How considerate of you, Jacen," Mara replied deadpan. But she nodded n agreement a second later. "He's right, though. If you can help it, try not to swat any more Yuuzhan Vong ships out of the sky. You heard the plan earlier, we'll be joined by the rest of the Galactic Alliance fleet once we get there. All you have to do is sit in Coruscant's orbit and look like that pretty, inviting, place that the Yun'o live in."

Sekot changed into Tescia's form and nodded obediently. "Okay, Jedi Masters. I'll trust you know what you are doing."
"We know what we're doing?" Anakin looked to the others in mock surprise.
"News to me," Jacen agreed. "Uncle?"
"We have some idea," Luke smiled faintly, his arms casually folded in front of his chest. "We're leaving the rest up to the Force."
Sekot-Tescia looked back and forth between the three male Jedi in astonishment, before shifting forms to the ten-year old Anakin Skywalker. The young boy grinned excitedly. "Jedi are so wizard. I should do that more often, trust in the Force like you do. Rather than trying to control things, it'd be neat to see what unfolds naturally."
Mara rolled her eyes and deliberately mussed the hair of Sekot-Skywalker. "Don't let them influence you too much, Sekot. The last thing this galaxy needs is a Force-sensitive comedian planet."
Sekot changed into Ahsi, and nodded. "I understand. It is just that I find the many views that have been introduced to me over the past month extremely interesting and refreshing. After existing for so long with only the Ferroans as my company, outside views have again led me to question my own beliefs and position in this galaxy. The arrival of the Yuuzhan Vong have only been a boon for me, and I thank you all for making it possible."
"Let's hope the arrival of the *rest* of the Yuuzhan Vong goes just as smoothly," Anakin said. "We *are* undermining their entire belief system, taking away the power they enjoy, and asking them to convert to an entirely new way of life. Well that, and bursting their dream of a galactic-wide Yuuzhan Vong empire. I don't think they'll take that too well."
"You know, you're more positive when Tahiri's around," Shaeri commented glibly, focusing on a qasha in front of her.
"Sorry," Anakin grimaced. It was hard to stay positive when worry for both what was to come and what was happening in several systems many lightyears away gnawed at him. He knew that Tahiri could take care of herself, but it didn't stop him from wincing as another spike of determined panic flared through their bond.
"How are they doing?" Nen Yim asked softly.
Anakin shrugged. "As good as you'd think. We're too far for details, but I think Shimrra's really thrown every single ship he has at Mon Calamari."
Nen Yim shook her head in disgust. "Madness has truly gripped him then. He would destroy our entire people than let us be free of his grip."

"It's a good thing we're almost there, then," Luke said solemnly.
"For the Yuuzhan Vong and for our friends at Mon Cal," Jacen agreed.
"I'll let the fleet know we're nearing our destination," Danni said, nodding to the others. "Are we still sticking with the plan?"
"To not engage unless fired upon?" Luke said. "Yes. The appearance of Zonama Sekot above Coruscant is bound to cause all sorts of internal strife, and I want to let those who follow Shimrra decide their own fate. As unlikely as it is, Shimrra and his inner circle deserve a chance to surrender, to have a life outside of everything they've been forced to become accustomed to. We're still Jedi, and I want to finish this war as we began it—as the defenders and not the aggressors."
Danni smiled gently. "I'll pass the message on, Master Skywalker."
When Danni left, Jacen offered his younger brother a wry grin. "It's almost done, little brother. This war."
"Yeah," Anakin said, matching his brother's positive outlook. "Almost."
[o-o-[Chapter End]-o-o]
A\N: Almost there! Almost there! Double-update Wednesday will take us to chapter 67, with the story finishing this Saturday and the Epilogue on Sunday.

ADA 66

Sixty-Six
[o-o-[I]-o-o]
The Calamari system was littered with debris of all sizes, corpses, and spent ordinance. Burning skeletons of ships ghosted under their own momentum through the stars, while tumbling shards of metal and coral floated in a seemingly endless sea. Bodies and parts of bodies from all sorts of races drifted aimlessly, some trapped within the burnt-out wrecks of once proud capital ships, others twirling about amongst the shrapnel-filled void. One planet had been destroyed, one comet reduced to space dust, and nearly ten million souls had lost their lives during the day-long battle. It was a graveyard on a scale never before seen.
And still the fighting waged on, going on into its second day. Following the endless sea of corpses and ruined vessels from the outer edge of the system all the way up until the second planet from the sun, one could literally trace the progress of the battle as time went on. The defenders were wholly overmatched and outgunned, but they were willing to spend their last breaths protecting the planet they had now been pushed back to. The assailants were every bit as determined to seize the planet, regardless of how pointless and futile an exercise the

battle had become. It was madness, insanity, and everyone knew it, but no one seemed inclined to stop the fighting any time soon.
After having her X-wing blown out from under her twice during the course of the battle, Jaina Solo stood aboard the bridge of the battle-scarred *Flames of Dathomir II* alongside the rest of the Twin Suns squadron. They had all been knocked out of the fight sometime during the sixteenth hour of battle, and could only add to the presence of the very small meld as they gazed on from the dim-lighting of the bridge. Nearly a hundred Jedi had been reduced to just over several dozen. The defending fleet reduced to a fifth of its size and shrinking with every engagement. All the while, the Yuuzhan Vong armada under Nas Choka appeared to absorb every loss of its own without slowing their attack.
The Yuuzhan Vong were pressing their attack once more, relying both on strategy and overwhelming numbers to completely collapse the left flank of the Galactic Alliance fleet.
"Come on, Anakin," Tahiri whispered plaintively, watching a *Rejuvenator*-class Star Destroyer disappear under a concentrated plasma barrage. She had her arm in a sling, and a bacta patch over her stomach. Her own fighter had been the victim of a plasma barrage, and Tahiri had just narrowly escaped a very fiery death. She was fortunate that the extent of her injuries were a broken arm, a few burns, and a perforated liver caused by a part of her fighter exploding into her. "Come on. We can't take much more of this."
A *Republic*-class cruiser attempted to fire on a Yuuzhan Vong frigate, only to have three more Yuuzhan Vong frigates swoop in and pound it from all sides. A Hapan Battle Dragon exploded off to the port side. A Mon Calamari cruiser, engulfed in flames, steered itself at the nearest Yuuzhan Vong Matalok before detonating its own drive core. Everywhere one looked, the tide of the battle was slowly turning in favor of the Yuuzhan Vong.
The defensive lines, which had been straining under the onslaught, finally shattered as the last Super Star Destroyer succumbed to the repeated firing of a fairly large segment of Nas Choka's fleet. The massive cruiser fired off one last volley, before falling completely silent as it began to break apart.
"[This is it.]" Lowbacca growled softly.
Jaina nodded in agreement. "Should have scheduled our butt kicking for another time."
"Too late now," Kyp, with streaks of dried blood on either side of his face, said grimly.

The *Flames of Dathomir II* rocked as two Yuuzhan Vong battleships broke through the line of *Nova*-class cruisers and Battle Dragons to engage the Hapan flagship.
"Queen Mother, the shields are failing! Please get to your emergency escape craft!" An officer shouted, just before her console exploded in a shower of sparks, pitching her out of her chair.
Tenel Ka clenched her jaw but remained where she was. Another explosion, and smoke and steam filled the bridge. Fires crackled in ruined computer banks and alarms blared incessantly as the pride and joy of Hapes began to buckle and melt under the twin broadsides it was receiving. One lucky plasma shot completely blew out a bulkhead in a deafening blast. Emergency mag-con shielding immediately activated, but not before some of the bridge crew were sucked out into the vacuum of space.
All around the blue gem that was Mon Calamari, Galactic Alliance forces were falling. And as if sensing victory was near, the Yuuzhan Vong under Shimrra pressed their attack with renewed vigor.
Then, just when it seemed like the battle was lost, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet pulled back, cleared Mon Calamari's gravity well, and disappeared into hyperspace.
Picking herself off the deck, Jaina grimaced. "Better late than never."
"*If* that armada is going to Coruscant," Ganner pointed out, still lying on the deck where he had fallen. "With all our ships here or there, it'd kind of be really bad if they jumped to Kashyyyk or Bothuwai."
Tenel Ka, who appeared to be the only person still on her feet despite the bucking and thrashing her ship had gone through, nodded wearily. "Helmsman, the trajectory of the enemy fleet?"
The officer weakly climbed back into his seat and checked. "Perlemian Trade Route, Your Majesty. Definitely Core-ward."
"Coruscant it is," Ganner shrugged.
"Are we hyperspace capable?" Tenel Ka asked.
"Yes, Your Highness. But battle capable is another story."
"All we need to do is reach Coruscant, helmsmen. The other fleet elements will handle the fighting. Inform all other Hapan vessels to jump to Coruscant if they are capable, or to return to Hapes if they have had enough or if there is a medical necessity. All other damaged vessels can remain here."
"Relaying orders now."
Tenel Ka looked to another bedraggled officer. "Have we received permission from High Command to depart?"

The communication's officer nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Supreme Commander Sien Sovv is giving anyone who is still capable of making the week's journey permission to depart."
"Very well," Tenel Ka's grey eyes gazed out of the blackened and cracked bridge viewport and to the remains of the many vessels that floated around them. "Take us out of Dac's gravity well and jump to Coruscant when ready. Hapes has a war to help end."
[o-o-[II]-o-o]
"Entering Coruscanti gravity well now, emerging from hyperspace."
All at once, the blue vortex gave way to a very familiar sight within the Core of the galaxy. The sight was viewed from an angle most people probably weren't used to. Instead of the stars, sun, or gas giant of Mobus, the sky was filled with the darkened and ravaged landscape of Coruscant.
Minutes passed in tense silence as those on the capital planet absorbed the shock of seeing a planet suddenly drop out of hyperspace above them.
"Detecting a Yuuzhan Vong fleet of fifty vessels in orbit, as well as a *Koros-Strohna.* It is definitely Shimrra's," a Freed One said, analyzing a blazebug readout. "They are holding positions at the moment."
"Receiving word from our intel units that mass riots are breaking out all over the planet," Mara added. She was in a command center created solely for the purpose of managing the end-conflict. Computers, qahsa, blazebug niches, communication devices of all sorts, and an assortment of other devices were scattered throughout the room and manned by Yuuzhan Vong, Ferroan, and Galactic Alliance personnel.
"Galactic Alliance fleet elements emerging from hyperspace now. General Antilles, General Panib, and General Bel Iblis all send their greetings."
"Grand Admiral Pellaeon's task group has left Zonama's gravity shadow and is linking up with the rest. Enemy fleet still holding position."
"We're detecting a lot of movement on the surface of the planet. It looks like Shimrra has emptied his garrisons in response to the rioting."
"Naazar," Anakin gestured to a large villip bundle. "You're up."
The former High Priest inclined his head politely and waved his hands over the array.
"All Yuuzhan Vong, hear me. I am Naazar, loyal servant to the god Yun-Yammka, and freed of the lies that had twisted the True Path. I speak to you all from the planet of Zonama Sekot, seed of the original Yuuzhan'tar and our true home. Zonama Sekot is as sentient as you or

I and has granted us permission to found our new home on its surface. We have no more need to fight, no more need to die. We *hav*e the home we have all been searching for, a home whose existence Shimrra knew of but tried to hide. This war has gone on for long enough, and it is now time for the Yuuzhan Vong to learn a new way of life. Already thousands of your brothers and sisters await you on this planet's surface, living in harmony. It is time we stand *with* the people of this galaxy, otherwise there will be no more galaxy left for either of us. All who wish to join the Freed Yuuzhan Vong on this planet, to make a home and live out the rest of your years in contented bliss, may do so. I am well aware that Shimrra will order his people to attack this planet, claiming that it is an affront for the True Path and that I am a mere heretic. I ask all of you to think for yourselves, to make your own decision. This war *is* over, we have the home we wanted, any more deaths beyond this point is not only pointless, but an insult to all that have died before us. Yun-Yuuzhan did not create stupid children and Yun-Yammka only smiles upon wars and battles where both sides are just in their cause. Think on what I have said, take your time. We will be in orbit willing to welcome all who wish to join us."
Naazar stepped down, and the villip choir reverted.
"Receiving villip transmission from the Calamari system, Nas Choka's fleet has been recalled."
"Confirmed, the survivors of the battle are also en route to Coruscant."
"What now?" Shaeri said in a soft voice as the babble of reports continued on in the background.
"Now," Jacen exhaled. "Now we wait."
[o-o-[III]-o-o]
To describe the situation on Coruscant as pandemonium would be fairly accurate. The weak Coruscanti sun had only just begun to grace the gleaming coralline structure of Shimrra's palace, when the light was completely shut out by a total eclipse. The presence of Zonama Sekot appearing so high in the sky, turning the planet into darkness, had unleashed sheer chaos. Nom Anor couldn't have possibly known that his fake prophecies held a kernel of truth in them, that Zonama Sekot would indeed appear to signal the end of an era. And yet the thousands who had heard and believed Yu'shaa's message immediately took Sekot's arrival as evidence of the prophesized time for rebellion.
Freed Ones, heretics, slaves, and so many others immediately took to the streets. Smaller guard posts and patrols were overwhelmed by a sheer mob of angry people, most brandishing make-shift clubs and bladed weapons.

Buildings were set aflame, several smaller temples razed, as the ground garrison was completely caught off-guard by the religious fervor-enhanced riot.
But then the counter-attack began, with the well-trained and well-armed warriors striking back with all the forces they had at their disposal. Ground and orbital based yammosks began hammering out a beat to seize control of parts of the unruly mass. Fire Breathers and Thrall Herders were deployed. The remains of durasteel buildings were collapsed on top whole crowds. It was slaughter.
Yet for every Shamed One the warriors cut down, there seemed to be a countless number of others willing to take their place. Both sides were fighting for a cause neither wanted to lose, and as they fought, the very planet seemed to tremble beneath their feet.
And watching the entire planet descend into chaos from his throne room high above the planet was Shimrra, his face a mask of sheer amusement.
"So," he whirled around in an almost manic fashion to look at his inner-circle. "The *Jeedai* have finally come to us, seek to insult us by claiming that Zonama Sekot is our salvation. "
"What are your commands, Dread One?"
"We will await the return of Nas Choka," Shimrra said slowly, walking the length of the room as Onimi pranced and danced about behind him. "And then we will burn that heretical creature and show everyone my true power."
"Supreme One, there are whispers that say that Zonama Sekot is the home of the gods," a High Priest whispered fearfully.
"Then when it is little more than a burning ball of gas, those who whisper will have been shown the error of their ways," Shimrra replied. "Have the Domain leaders fire on anyone who approaches the planet. Anyone who attempts to land on that abomination has obviously turned their backs on me, and the gods."
"And the riots in the streets?"
"The *dhuryam* and yammosk will take care of them," Shimmra answered. Both creatures used telepathic and gravity waves to manipulate Yuuzhan Vong life, including Yuuzhan Vong themselves. It was how the ships were able to be so synchronized in fighting, and how a planet could be shaped to exact sets of specifications. "They serve my will, the will of the gods, and they will not allow the riots to continue. The heretics will be cleansed from this planet and we will be rid of their blasphemous nature."
Shimrra walked out onto the balcony connect to the room and held out a hand. Almost immediately after, the entire building shook. Those

inside cried out as the World Brain began vibrating the entirety of the planet with powerful tremors.
"Fear not," Shimrra declared as distant buildings began to collapse from the seismic activity. He held out his arms wide. "This is the gods' way of showing their anger. I shall plunge this world into fire and have even the heavens tremble before me! A week, a month, a year. It does not matter how long the infidels give us, we will live on. We are Yuuzhan Vong, inheritors of the galaxy the Yun'o has granted us. It is our divine right to be here regardless of the insignificant creatures who once dwelled in our place."
Great storm clouds began to gather, flashes of lightning rippling across the nebula-like expanse. Thunder boomed and the winds began to blow as Shimrra continued to use the World Brain to manipulate the weather.
And since the World Brain was not yet fully mature, the task caused it to abandon other functions. Maw Luurs began regurgitating their meals, whole fields of crops instantly wilted and died. The shaking of the ground caused great fissures to appear that swallowed whole city-blocks.
"This galaxy is our home," Shimrra declared. "No one but the gods can tell us to leave. No one but the gods can set the boundaries for us. This galaxy is ours to rule, the lives of millions of Yuuzhan Vong prove that. They are martyrs and they will be remembered. But only if we are victorious once more. There can be no peace so long as the *Jeedai* live. There can be no future for the Yuuzhan Vong without us leading our people into it. It is our destiny to rule over all, and I pity those that do not have the strength to see it in that manner. So we will now stand as Yuuzhan Vong, stand and cast the heretics and *Jeedai* and all who oppose us into an early grave. When the sun rises on the sixth day, we shall then crush the infidels and rule over all for all time!"
The winds were whipping around him now, but his large form appeared impervious to the harsh currents of air surrounding him. Forked bolts of lightning flared behind him, giving his rainbow colored eyes an insane, yet powerful gleam. The rest of his inner circle all bowed their heads in acknowledgment of his divine right to rule.
"*Al'tanna Shimrra knotte Yun'o!*"
[o-o-[IV]-o-o]
It was strange being on the serene and harmonious Zonama Sekot, yet actually being able to see the pandemonium on Coruscant in the sky. The planet was completely engulfed in shadow, with an occasional gout of flame flaring up, or a larger structure crashing down in a cloud of dirt and debris.

Those on Zonama Sekot were almost like omnipotent gods, watching the struggles going on in the planet below and yet doing nothing to stop them. Every time a ball of fire arched up from Coruscant's surface, or storm clouds gathered to shroud an area in darkness, those on Zonama Sekot could only look on and pray.

For those on the planet below, the story was almost the exact opposite.

Despite being out-matched by the warriors who were still allied with Shimrra, the Freed Ones needed to only look up into *their* sky to gain the motivation to continue their fight. The sight of Zonama Sekot represented their hope, their future, the home of the gods. They would fight on for that future, for the gods that surely had to exist now that Zonama Sekot had arrived.

The warriors they faced saw the planet as a threat, something that couldn't possibly exist simply because their priests and leaders told them so. The planet was just another trick, a lie conjured by the infidels to further fragment the strength of the Yuuzhan Vong people. And that angered them, enraged them. The infidels dare mock their religion? Use their most sacred ideals against them? And so the warriors would fight on for their own beliefs, to show the galaxy what happens to those who defy the will of the Yun'o, of the true gods.

For five days and nights, the battle on the surface of Coruscant wore on, neither side gaining the upper hand. In that time, Shimrra continued to manipulate the World Brain, throwing the already decimated planet into further ruin. It was almost as if, by manipulating the nature of Coruscant, he was mocking the gods who were watching him, daring them to come to him. It was clear by his actions what his response to Naazar's offer was, and it was clear he was not going to give up his power voluntarily.

The situation was made all the more serious when Nas Choka's fleet returned from Coruscant with the full force of the Yuuzhan Vong armada at his disposal. Fortunately, the survivors of the Galactic Alliance side of the fight had also arrived, and it appeared that both sides were lining up for one final showdown.

As a shuttle, only one of many, ran through its final landing sequences, Luke, Mara, Anakin, Jacen, and Shaeri all waited eagerly for its passengers to disembark.

The cycle completed, and the shuttle's ramp lowered.

Tahiri was first to emerge, and immediately sought out Anakin, rushing to embrace him in a tight hug. Jaina was next to emerge from the shuttle, arm-in-arm with Jag and looking like she wasn't inclined to let go anytime soon. Tenel Ka was last, somehow still looking regal

despite the bedraggled state of her friends. She practically glided over to Jacen's side, silently slipping her hand into his and using their bond to communicate feelings she wanted no one else to hear. She leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes as Jacen returned the nonverbal exchange of emotions.

Han and Leia emerged from a very battered and burnt-looking *Millennium Falcon*, greeting Luke and Mara with tired, but happy grins.

"Your ship looks even worse than before," Mara commented, shaking Han's hand.

"Nothing a few coatings of paint won't fix," Han shrugged with a roguish grin. "You two missed one heck of a fight."

"I'm glad to see that the two of you made it out in one piece."

"Really wish the same could be said for my ship," Han sighed.

Other shuttles began to disgorge their own passengers.

"So this is Zonama Sekot?" Ganner said with a whistle.

"Yes," Anakin nodded, his arms wrapped around his girlfriend.

"It's amazing," was all Zekk managed to add, feeling the powerful Force-presence of the planet beneath his feet.

"That about sums it up," Kyp Durron agreed. "Leave it to the Solos and Skywalkers to find an improbable place like this."

More improbable was the group of people that followed Kyp, Ganner, and Zekk out onto the planet.

Nearly every single Jedi of the Order, from apprentices to masters, stepped out from their shuttles and onto Zonama Sekot for the first time; their faces reflecting varying degrees of awe and amazement. Representatives from multiple eras of Jedi Orders were present, more Jedi in one place than even the Jedi themselves were used to.

Time definitely didn't make anyone more or less of a Jedi.

There were the Purge survivors, who were completely delighted in being able to meet each other after spending decades in hiding. Much to Scout's delight, Olee Starstone had used her position in the Imperial government to help hide several other Jedi directly under the Empire's nose. The Togruta Jedi, Deran Nalual, who had been blinded during the Purge, had survived; along with and Jin-Lo Rayce, Drake Lo'gaan, and Erika. When she emerged from a private ship of her own, a mischievous Callista Ming even took some pleasure in shocking the others with her new body, and story of her time spent as a computer. The aged Whiphid Jedi Master K'kruhk, and the Jedi he had saved during the Purge, likewise rejoiced at the reunion, with hugs and laughter all around. Many of those he had saved had just been younglings when the Purge began, and everyone was heartened at

their survival. At the same time, Neti Jedi Master T'ra Saa and the ones she had saved were equally delighted and relieved for the reunion.
The surviving members of Luke Skywalker's first Jedi Praxeum were also present. They ranged from Kyp, Cilghal, and Mara, to Kam and Tionne Solusar. The Anx Jedi Maduurin and Kyle Katarn emerged from a shuttle alongside Streen and Corran, rounding out their class of Jedi. They may have been the first new Jedi in several decades, but all of their paths had been different and filled with their own challenges. It was a bittersweet meeting. They exchanged handshakes and smiles, but also silently acknowledged their friends who had fallen during the war.
The masters and knights trained immediately after, Kirk Dekim, Saba Sebatyne, Daye Azur-Jamin, and many others were also present. They were no less amazed by Zonama Sekot and used the moment to ground themselves in the Force on a level they hadn't been able to before.
Klin-Fa had arrived with Uldir and almost immediately joined the other Jedi, happily meeting everyone in her trademark yellow animal-skin dress. Even Ben Skywalker and Kyrelle Frieniel were in attendance, brought in with the rest of the very young Jedi by Kam and Tionne. From Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin's friends, to those of Valin's and Waxarn's group, the Jedi on Zonama Sekot spanned a multitude of generations.
They had all arrived for one final enclave, one final show of solidarity, in the face of the coming battle.
And they were not the only ones.
Soldiers, politicians, scientists, and civilians.
Imperial, Hapan, Bakuran, Tion Hegemony, Corellian, Ferroan, and Yuuzhan Vong.
Hover platforms allowed Vedo and Embra the Hutt, escorted by a small retinue of their attendants to emerge from their shuttle and look about the planet in mild approval.
A delegation of blue-skinned Chiss were already in heavy conversation with the reptilian P'w'eck leader, Lwothin, and his entourage as they disembarked from their shuttle.
While Boba Fett, flanked by a squadron of Supercommandos, stood with their arms folded in front of them, looking extremely bored.
The Human Replica Droids that were now the Iron Knights blended in seamlessly with the different peoples they were mingling amongst; and the pilot of the *Dancing Droid* could be seen talking to them with great enthusiasm.

Artoriasi royal family members Kaye and Finn Galfridian were in deep discussion with Malinza Thanas, with the hulking form of Arbeloa protectively at their side.
And a collection of scientists led by Danni Quee, Sanix Fous, Nen Yim, and Olee Starstone stood out amongst the members of the Smuggler's Alliance led by Talon Karde and Lando Calrissian.
Sien Sovv, Garm Bel Iblis, Wedge Antilles, Cal Omas, the heroes and leaders of the Galactic Alliance stepped off different shuttles and greeted those nearby. Not to be outdone by the former 'Rebels', Grand Admiral Gilad Pellaeon, Moff Ephin Saretti, Moff Kurlen Flennic, and recently promoted Fleet Admiral Tanda Pryl, were also in attendance. There were representatives from over a hundred planets. Jedi and personnel of all ages from all reaches of the galaxy.
When the shuttles were finally emptied, everyone was led to the amphitheater that had only recently been used by the Ferroans in their vote to rejoin the galaxy. People took their seats without trouble, regardless of the differences and ideologies that had once driven them. A low din filled the air, the energy in the clearing palpable as eyes occasionally darted up to the planet of Coruscant high in the sky. Pal'iva Konat and several camera crews went about setting up several recording devices and holocams to capture the momentous occasion and broadcast what was about to happen to the rest of the galaxy. And as 'mid-day' finally descended, the crowd grew quiet.
Luke Skywalker very calmly moved to the center of the ancient stone stage in customary Jedi robes, his hands at his sides in a disarming gesture. Looking up to the gathered crowd, he inclined his head solemnly. "Thank you all for coming. I know we're all a little nervous about what is to happen these next few days, but there is no need to be. We are on the cusp of a new era, one where this galaxy stands united, successfully triumphant in the face of the adversity that had kept us fractured for so long. We should not be nervous because all of us are taking that step into the future together. Regardless of our personal beliefs, our ideological differences, the planet we are from, the governments we serve, we are all part of this galaxy. I now give the floor to Jedi Knight Jacen Solo, whose idea it was to have all of us gather here today."
Jacen rose from his seat and took his uncle's place. Intelligent brown eyes swept across the crowd, noting the supportive smiles of his friends and family with a faint nod of his own. Taking a deep breath, he began to speak.
"Never before has the galaxy stood so united in cause and purpose. Not even in the days of the Republic have so many stood up and joined

hands. The Galactic Alliance, the Empire, Corellia, the Hutt Empire, the Tion Hegemony, in the vast scale of time, we are all simply a part of a larger cycle, of the Force. Despite the best efforts of the Jedi, we have never been able to come together as we have today. It is only because we stand together as one galaxy that we have any chance at holding back the chaos.

It took the Yuuzhan Vong for this galaxy to set aside what must now seem like petty differences. It took four years of constant warring for us to realize just how valuable our home galaxy is. While we squabbled over our little territories and resources, the Yuuzhan Vong were spending centuries searching for a galaxy lost through the very warring that had become so prevalent throughout this galaxy. In a way, the Yuuzhan Vong have saved us and opened our eyes to what truly mattered. They are the presence that brought this galaxy together and made it realize just how much we all had to lose had we stuck to our prejudices and bickering. No matter how this war ends, we have to remember that. The Yuuzhan Vong could have been us, locked in a constant struggle for power and territory until there was nothing left for the victors. Only when we stand together will this galaxy be strong, will we be able to enjoy the peace many of us have yearned for. If, when the war ends, we continue our petty struggles, then we will have learned nothing. We will have insulted the sacrifices of all those who have died in this war thus far, and continued down the very path that ruined the Yuuzhan Vong.

In another few hours, we will all embark on one final battle to end this war. But our goal is not the annihilation of the Yuuzhan Vong people. It is acceptance of them. Many of you may disagree with me, and that is fine. Just know that in the past two years, nearly two hundred thousand Freed Yuuzhan Vong have died in defense of this galaxy, of your home planets and ways of life. They have shed blood and lost family, gone up against their own friends and family, and have sacrificed much for a galaxy they know will vilify them no matter what they do. All they ask is to be allowed to live on this planet in peace. After the centuries of searching for a home, they finally have one. The Yuuzhan Vong have become just as much a part of this galaxy as the Galactic Alliance or Empire, even played a role in getting us to set aside our differences. When we mount our final assault on Coruscant, it is not to defeat the Yuuzhan Vong, but to finally give them the chance to set aside their weapons and live in peace. To give all of us that chance.

Look around you, at your neighbors and all those who have gathered here today. For those of you watching this broadcasts in the fleets safeguarding this world, merely look out the nearest viewport to see

vessels from all corners of this galaxy standing in solidarity with your own. Today, the entire galaxy stands united, saying in a single voice: 'this is our home, we will not let it anyone destroy it'. This war is almost over. The end of the nightmarish struggles that have consumed this galaxy is at hand. When history looks back on this moment, they will see that this war was not our downfall, but our salvation. That despite all the losses we have endured, this war was truly a unifying force."
Jacen's last words rang with the air of authority in the completely silent amphitheater. His speech had had the desired effect, filling his audience with both strength and purpose. They were fighting for their homes, for peace. And they would succeed.
Jaina stood, taking a place by her brother as a holoprojector was rolled out. When the image activated, a section of Coruscant rose up for everyone to see.
"There are two main objectives. Shimrra's Citadel, and the World Brain. The World Brain is located where the Senate building was, and has to be secured to stop Shimrra from wreaking any more havoc. Shimrra's Citadel is both a strategic and symbolic target and located where the Imperial Palace once was. Taking it will show that he no longer carries any legitimacy among his gods or his people. On the ground, our forces will outnumber the remnants of the garrisons loyal to him. Intel reports that his garrisons have all bunkered down in the temple district, where the citadel is, and the senate building region. We already have secured drop-points thanks to the Freed Ones and intel units, so it's only a matter of dislodging those entrenched positions without taking too many casualties in return. The main problem will be in orbit. "
The hologram zoomed out to show blocky red dots representing Nas Choka's fleet. "Shimrra's forces will no doubt do everything in their power to destroy this planet, so that's where our own fleets come in. Until Shimrra and the elite circle with him surrender or die, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet will continue to press their attack. Even after Shimrra's death, there is no guaranteeing his fleets will stand down, so prepare for the worst. The ground forces will let everyone know the instant Shimrra is taken down. The Fleet commanders have already received their assignments so you can return to your ships and prepare now."
The officers all rose and efficiently filed out of the amphitheater. Some of the Jedi who would be embedded within the fleet, such as Waxarn Kel's Death Knights and the Wild Knights under Saba Sebatyne, also rose and left. The hologram of Coruscant zoomed back in, splitting into two images with streets highlighted in glowing red.

"The Jedi will be divided up between the two targets," Jaina said. "Intel reports that Shimrra has not left his citadel since the riots began, so myself, my brothers, and a handful of others will be leading the march on his headquarters in an effort to take him out. Another team of Jedi, led by Jedi Katarn, Durron, and Esterhazy, will work with the Mandalorians to assault the Senate building. Their goal is to clear out all of Shimrra's supporters in the area, and use a tranquilizer developed by Danni Quee and the science team, to temporarily neutralize the World Brain. Both locations will be heavily guarded and will have a minimum of fifty thousand warriors protecting them. Also, we fully expect Shimrra to have reinforced those areas with warriors from Nas Choka's fleet, so numbers could be as high as a hundred thousand. Anti-air batteries and ground-based coralskippers will be the primary threat on our approach, so this won't be easy at all. We've assigned all ground forces to one or the other, some will be with us Jedi, the others with Mandalore and his men. Any questions?"
There were none.
"Then, may the Force be with us all."
[o-o-[V]-o-o]
The two fleets assembled opposite of each other one last time, giant masses of ships and fighters stretching out over the skies of Coruscant. For the final time, screens of coralskippers, blastboulders, and the Slayer's voxyn-shaped coralskippers, faced down screens of X-wings, A-wings, and a varying array of metal fighters. Cruisers, frigates, battleships, all lined up in staggered formation, staring down their counterpart scant kilometers away.
The Galactic Alliance forces were backlit by the glowing blue and green gem that was Zonama Sekot, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet by the dark and dying world of the capital of the galaxy. Both fleets maneuvered slowly, cautiously. Several skirmishes had already been fought, each leader testing the other, refusing to commit unless absolutely necessary.
"Here's to hoping we survive another trip to this planet," Jaina remarked, staring through her transport's viewport at the rows and columns of other transports that surrounded her own.
"Hey, it's my first time back since Shimrra got his hands on it, I'm excited to see what he's done with the place,*"* Ganner said cheerfully into his personal comlink. The others in his transport consisted of Natua, Valin, and five mixed units of commandos.
"Not much left to see, really," Tahiri chimed in. The actually waiting before they received the 'commence operations' signal was sheer

torture for all involved. *"Although the temple district we're heading to has some pretty beautiful coral buildings."*
"[*Learned that from your last visit]?"* Lowbacca asked.
"Uh huh, when I was brought here to visit Yu'shaa."
"Well, I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to admire the architecture once we touch down," Ganner added, keeping his tone light. He was deliberately using the Force to help spread a sense of calmness to the otherwise jittery occupants of the nearly three hundred troop transports holding position within the middle of the Galactic Alliance fleet. "Not too much time though. Any recommendations on what I should see first?"
"I would have recommended the temple to Yun-Yammka, but the riots knocked it down two days ago," Tahiri laughed.
"What about the temple to me?" Jaina asked. "*Isn't Ganner supposed to be one of my subordinates?"*
"Right," Ganner chuckled. He was well aware that the soldiers closest to him were looking at him as if he had lost his mind. "I should pay my proper respects, Goddess. Forgive me."
"Just this time."
"All units." The voice of Sien Sovv filled the comm-lines and had a chillingly sobering effect. *"Commence the attack. Admiral Pellaeon, the fleet is yours. General Jamiro, Master Skywalker, begin landing your troops."*
"Order received. Dawn Makers taskforce, permission to begin your runs granted."
Ganner closed his eyes and focused on the meld as his transport lurched to life and veered towards Coruscant along with the hundreds of others. Through his connection with the other Jedi, he could see everything; the path of his shuttle, the departure of thousands of starfighters, the maneuvering of capital ships, everything. The sheer scope and scale surpassed even what he had seen at Mon Calamari, and he could help but feel his stomach rise up into his throat.
"Need a few words of encouragement, Jedi Rhysode?" Natua said slyly.
Ganner opened his eyes and smirked at the Falleen Knight. "Green Girl, *I* am a Ganner Rhysode. A god to some. The day I need reassuring is the day people no longer recognize me in the streets."
Natua returned Ganner's expression, albeit inwardly. Falleen weren't allowed to show emotion after all.
The comm-lines immediately filled with chatter as the fleet groups began the obligatory exchange of warheads with their Yuuzhan Vong counterparts. Voices overlapped one and other, some frantic, others icy calm. Orders, yells of fear, shouts of defiance. The space above

Coruscant once again let up with flares and explosions, while the surface of the planet brightened with anti-ship plasma fire.
Their transport rocked violently as it began to push through Coruscant's upper atmosphere. All around them, streaks of plasma and flame lashed out. A nearby transport was promptly incinerated by a plasma missile. Two more collided trying to avoid another burst, the explosion from the collision hurling the bodies of the soldiers into the thin atmosphere. Coralskippers, attached to long-abandoned skyscrapers and Yuuzhan Vong coral-structures on the surface, broke free and rose up to meet the flotilla of transports.
Receiving instructions through the meld, Ganner grimaced and made his way to the cockpit. Mentally directing the Wild Knights towards their location, he tapped the pilot of the transport on the shoulder. "Pilot! Hard to port, and abandon our approach. Anakin and the others say three squadrons of coralskippers are aiming to cut us off."
"Yes sir," the Imperial pilot acknowledged. The transport veered hard again, the view of the planet below swinging away.
Other transports likewise abandoned their route, but not everyone was fast enough. Howling out from the darkened surface of the planet, thirty-six coralskippers dove into the formation with plasma weapons blazing. Several more transports were destroyed; either by the coralskipper fire, or the ground-based anti-ship fire the coralskippers forced them into. The Wild Knights and three other Galactic Alliance squadrons darted in only seconds later, picking up the coralskippers in a heated dogfight in the center of the transport formation. Coralskippers dropped rapidly, but one of the more damaged alien fighters promptly plotted a collision course that wiped out another transport.
Another squadron of coralskippers pulled in, but these weren't any coralskippers. Like a true pack, the Slayer-controlled modified coralskippers lunged at the nearest transport and ripped it to shreds with their plasma cannons. The X-wings that were escorting the transport tried to fire back, but they were no match for the Force-aware reflexes of Shimrra's genetically engineered warriors. Within the span of three seconds, the tide was turned once more and transports began to drop at an increasing rate.
"I wonder if I'd be safer in a sandcrawler," Ganner muttered, gripping the doorframe to the cockpit as their transport came under attack.
A frantic beeping on the control console indicated a failure of the shields, and Ganner cursed. His fears were confirmed when the pilot spared a moment to glance back up at him. "Tell the others to brace for impact. I'll try to put us down somewhere safe."

Only a second later, the back half of the transport was blown away in a blaze of flame. The transport promptly dipped, spinning wildly as it did. Ganner was thrown back out of the cockpit as the metal ship began to disintegrate all around them, barely grabbing another handhold that kept himself from joining most of the unfortunate soldiers who had been onboard.
"About those words of encouragement?" Natua shouted, fear clear in her eyes. Both she and Valin, along with ten others, were clinging to a cargo-mesh as the planet flashed by below the gaping maw that was once the back of the transport.
"Sure," Ganner breathed, flinching as they were slammed hard against the nearest wall. "Don't let go!"
"Not really helping!" Valin shouted over the rush of air and roaring of disintegrating shuttle.
"Look on the bright side, the ground is getting closer?"
"How is that a good thing?" One of the surviving Hapan commandos yelled.
"It means that the guy who shot us decided not to turn the other half of the transport into a burning ball of metal," Ganner yelled. "We have a marginally greater chance of surviving than if he had continued shooting!"
"You have a point," Valin managed. He reached out a hand and promptly grabbed the Hapan commando's hand just as her bloodied hand lost its grip on the cargo mesh.
"On the down side, the ground is getting *really* close," Ganner hissed, watching the war-ravaged buildings flash by them at an ever faster pace. "We'll probably be hitting the ground any time now."
"Think positive, Jedi Rhysode," Natua said. "You're much better at that!"
"Currently thinking of a way to survive," Ganner's body was twisted once more as the transport violently careened off an outcropping of durasteel. "Natua! Since Valin isn't so great with the whole moving-rocks business, I'm going to need your help!"
"Go on!"
"Imagine a giant pillow of Force energy filling this place," Ganner shouted. "We can't stop this ship from crashing, but we can minimize the damage! Just fill what's left of this ship with the Force and hope it's enough to cushion us!"
"Okay!" Natua nodded.
"What about me?" Valin shouted, barely making himself heard.

"Put all the other commandos to sleep just as we're about to hit," Ganner replied. "Trauma should be less if their bodies aren't in any condition to register it!"
"And you're sure this will work?"
"In theory!"
"In theory?"
"I haven't heard of anyone trying it before."
"Probably because they were all sane!"
"We don't really have another choice, Valin," Natua said in support of the idea.
"Alright! Let me know when."
Ganner used the Force to plot their course, and then nodded to each of the younger Knights soberly. "Start my plan, impact in ten seconds."
[o-o-[VI]-o-o]
Ganner, Valin and Natua's transport is down, came the message from Seff Hellin over the meld. He was with Maduurin in orbit using his battle meditation abilities to boost the morale and coordination of the ground soldiers. *They're still alive. Scans show the remains of their transport crashing into the Senate Building.*
"Talk about luck," Zekk shook his head in disbelief, helping to fly the ship they were in. Like usual, he was the co-pilot and participating in another daring—see near suicidal—mission against a large amount of people who wanted to blast them out of the sky. Of course, the pilot of the ship was someone he had never expected to be working alongside of, Shaeri Jamaane. Among the first of the Freed Ones, Shaeri seemed right at home piloting their vessel through the countless flashes of missiles and plasma. "Well, not the getting shot down part, but the actual surviving and landing in the one place they could do some good when they recover."
"No kidding," Tahiri exhaled from the passenger seat, the knowledge that their friends were still alive taking a weight off of her shoulders. She refocused on the Force-enhanced Vongsense image she, Anakin, and Jacen were maintaining for the rest of the allied forces.
They were onboard the *Veila*, providing cover for as many transports as they could. But they were only one ship, and Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong were zealously fighting for their leader and gods. The *Veila* swooped in and out, diving around coralskipper squadrons and blastboulders with guns blazing.
Shaeri, I've picked up several Slayer-controlled coralskippers. The sentient ship sent mentally.

"What's the problem?" The Freed One said, her brow scrunched beneath the primary cognition hood as she struggled to maintain a position in the middle of the crowd of transports.
They appear to be utilizing a meld similar to the meld the Jedi are employing. They are avoiding my return fire with skills that suggest they are an improvement over the Slayers we faced on Cato Neimoidia and Dac.
"Tahiri, do you have any advice?" Shaeri said. "I cannot go up against their powers of prediction."
"To take out a Force-sensitive, you need a Force-sensitive, huh," Tahiri mused. She stroked a control cluster and a compartment emerged revealing a second cognition hood. "Zekk, you don't mind taking control of the weapons?"
Zekk glanced at the cognition hood, and then at the steering column he had been using. "Sure, I guess."
"Shaeri, just try and give Zekk as many targets as possible. And don't worry Zekk, the *Veila* can do most the work. She just isn't Force-aware. Tell her where to shoot, and she'll fire the moment the thought crosses your mind."
"That's neat," Zekk remarked. "Here goes nothing."
I have synchronized myself with Jedi Knight Zekk's thought processes. Adjusting firing time for slight delay in neuro-transmission. You are right, Tahiri. He thinks too much.
"Hey!" Zekk said in protest from beneath the organic hood.
Tahiri grinned. "Don't worry, she said the same thing about Jacen too. You're in good company." Her grin faded as her Vongsense picked up another threat. "We're going to have another squadron of those voxyn –coralskippers coming at us from point three-three."
"I'm still trying to deal with the first group, these guys are good."
Their shots are also getting more accurate. I am unsure how much longer my dovin basal shielding can hold them off. Sorry, I'm new at absorbing this much fire.
"No need to apologize, *Veila*," Tahiri said lightly. "We'll just let our friends know that we need help."
Tahiri, Jacen, and Anakin quickly reached out through the meld to see if there was anyone in the immediate area who could help them. Unfortunately, almost everyone they knew was either on a transport, or engaged in a pitch battle with the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong armada. There *was* one group currently between battles, but it wasn't the likeliest of choices.
"The Death Knights," Tahiri whispered, glancing uncertainly over her shoulder. Despite the unity of the Jedi Order, if there was one thing

that remained fragmented, it was the attitude of the Death Knights towards both Jacen and Anakin. After the Remnant debacle, they had made it quite clear that they would let the two Solos burn if given the opportunity.
Tahiri focused on the meld and reached out to Waxarn and the others, indicating a need for assistance. She received a very cold response, and the Death Knights didn't appear to deviate from their course towards a different part of the battlefield.
The shock and anger that erupted through different parts of the Jedi meld temporarily blocked everything out, with Jaina's thoughts roundly cursing Waxarn for abandoning her brothers standing out at the end of the explosion of outrage. There was a tense pause, then one of the Death Knights broke off.
"*This is Death Knight Five, Si'ada here. Give me a sec and I'll be right with you, Veila."*
"Thanks," Tahiri let out the breath she had taken. Si'ada's decision had apparently force the hands of the rest of the Death Knights, as the entire squadron looped back around and began to burn jets after her.
"*No problem. We're all Jedi, right?"* Si'ada responded. *"Just don't expect any favors in the future. You now owe the Death Knights one, got it?"*
"Yup," Tahiri replied. She felt the Jedi meld return to normal, although there was still a small amount of disgust, both from the other Death Knights for having to save the Solos, and from the other Jedi who still couldn't believe what had nearly happened, lingering.
"Now you see why I'm staying on Zonama Sekot?" Anakin said softly, entering the cockpit with his brother. They had both reached their limit with the Force-enhanced Vongsense, and it was now up to the natural skills of everyone else to do what had to be done. "If just this single instance can disrupt the entire meld like that, it's better if I remove myself from the equation all together."
Jacen sighed and nodded. "Yeah, so much for unity and being one galaxy despite our differing opinions."
"At least they came through when it counted," Zekk said, his focus mostly on the *Veila*'s plasma and laser cannons.
With the Death Knights' help, the *Veila* and Zekk were able to chase away the two squadrons of Slayer-controlled coralskippers, slagging a couple in the process. Once the threat was gone, two of the Death Knights flew alongside the hybrid craft.
"*Veila, your path is clear. Head groundside and we'll continue to cover the transports,"* Waxarn said professionally.
"Understood," Shaeri used her own cognition hood to give a mental command to her ship. "Beginning our descent now."

[o-o-[VII]-o-o]

Jaina let out a breath of relief when she saw the *Veila* finally land at the designated gathering point; the western most section of what had once been the Glitannai Esplanade. Once *the* most prestigious avenue on Coruscant, the entire esplanade, along with its surrounding luxury apartments and stores, had been reduced to a three-kilometer wide, unrecognizable canyon during the invasion. The nearly kilometer deep furrow within the durasteel and rock surface of the planet led all the way to the gleaming curves of the remains of the Imperial Palace off in the distance. Shimrra's citadel sat atop the remains, stretching up high into the sky and bristling with jagged points and smooth arches.

Large puddles of water dotted the way forward, as the shattered remains of buildings and streets seemed to reach out to those who would use the long-abandoned pathway. Between where they were and where they needed to be were Yuuzhan Vong creatures of all sorts, thousands of warriors, and all sorts of dangers. The nearly seven kilometer journey was *not* going to be easy.

"Anakin, Tahiri, Jacen, Zekk," Jaina nodded to each as they emerged from the ship. The *Veila* then took off again, with Shaeri piloting it back to the fleet to aid in the orbital fighting.

"Jaina," Jacen nodded once. "Are we ready?"

"Most of the transports made it down," Jaina gestured to the massive staging area that had been secured by the Freed Ones on the surface and the members of the Coruscanti resistance movement led by Wraith Squadron's Bhindi Drayson and Balijos Arnjak.

Anakin gazed off into the darkened pathway before them, and then up at the distant upper levels of the planet. He couldn't help but let out a small laugh as he did.

"Anakin?" Tahiri tilted her head.

"Uncle Luke had his trench-run, we have ours," Anakin pointed off into the distance.

"Only we're not in fighters with super-powerful lasers and torpedoes," Tahiri shook her head in amusement. "And we're walking the rest of the way instead of flying around at high speeds." She glanced down at the muddy and debris-filled ground with a glare. The nature of the operation had forced her to wear combat boots, and she wasn't exactly the happiest of people.

"True. But we do have them," Anakin jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the staging ground.

There, ground forces from all over the galaxy had assembled. There were Imperial Walkers, Hapan hover-tanks, and Chiss maser-armed APCs, forming up alongside their respective infantry units. Corellia's

ground forces were backed by turbo-laser mounted speeders, which were escorted by an assortment of Galactic Alliance tanks and light-attack vehicles. While the Tion Hegemony used the technology they had inherited from a defunct Commerce Guild to field OG-10 and newer OG-15 Heavy Spider walkers.
Surprisingly, the Hutts had donated two armed and armored Sandcrawlers, manned with their own people and acting as mobile battering rams. And even more surprising were the twelve rancor-riding Dathomiri sent over by Teneniel Djo to aid in the final battle as Dathomir's contribution to the war-effort. The Dathmori were being led by Jedi Knight Kirana Ti, and Damaya, both experts in the more physical side of the Force. The brightly painted war-beasts seem right at home alongside the equally fearsome *rakamat* provided by the Freed Yuuzhan Vong.
A phalanx of speeder-bike mounted soldiers hovered at the ready, numbering just over two hundred in total. While Freed Yuuzhan Vong riders sat atop their reptilian mounts with amphistaff at the ready. And in front of them all was a third of the Jedi Order; Olee, Bazel, Zekk, Tesar, Lowbacca, and Corran. Three dozen Jedi, their friends and family. Another third was in orbit covering them all and taking on Nas Choka's best, while the final third was leading the attack on the Senate Building. It was a concerted effort to bring peace to the galaxy, and the Jedi were once more in the thick of it.
General Jamiro emerged from the gathered crowd of soldiers with several subordinates in his wake.
"Colonel Solo, Jedi," Jamiro nodded curtly.
"General," Jaina saluted.
"Everything's ready, we're awaiting your word," General Jamiro said smoothly.
Jaina looked to her brothers, and to her friends nearby. She then pulled her lightsaber free and turned towards Shimrra's palace off in the distance. "Give the order, we're moving out."
[o-o-[VIII]-o-o]
Luke Skywalker held his two-year old son close to his chest, his wife leaning supportively against him as they stared up into the sky. They were just outside the command center on Zonama Sekot, with the perfect vantage point to watch the twin battlefields.
"I should be out there," Luke said softly.
"Out *there* is not our place anymore, Farmboy. Trust the others to do what has to be done. They've had a good teacher after all."
Luke closed his eyes, knowing that Mara was right, like usual. This war stopped being *his* war the moment it began; it had just taking him a

while to realize that. His war had been with the Empire, against Palpatine, the warlords, and all the Force-crazed individuals that had followed. But that time had passed. *His* time had passed. As much as he wanted to be on Coruscant fighting alongside his niece and nephews, amongst the many surviving Jedi who had been sent to the surface, he didn't belong there anymore. His place was now with his wife, with Ben.

"It's hard to step away, even when I know I should," Luke said with a rueful smile.

"The Jedi Order will be fine without us," Mara rubbed his back. "You made sure of that. All you have to do now is sit back and relax, and spend time with your children."

Luke's mind froze as it registered Mara's words. "Children?"

Mara's emerald green eyes glittered playfully. "Is there a problem with your hearing, Farmboy?"

Luke's gaze darted from the space battle above to his wife's stomach; eyes just as wide as they were when he discovered that she had been pregnant with Ben.

He supposed he should have expected it. Coupled with the continued survival of his niece and nephews, ever since he had handed over the reins of the Order to the High Council, he no longer felt the pressures and burdens of war.

And a less stressed Luke, meant a much happier Mara Jade Skywalker. With the weight of the Jedi Order no longer on his shoulders, and with the peace and relative privacy that he and Mara had been granted on the Force-abundant Zonama Sekot, they had been able to rekindle their romance and intimacy once more. The thought of having another child after Ben, however, hadn't even crossed his mind.

But as he reached out with the Force, he could definitely feel that glimmer of life growing within the woman he loved, and immediately accepted the gift the Force was giving him.

"I figured, with the war ending, and you retiring from the Order, our children would be more than fine," Mara said softly, one of her hands squeezing his. "And at least this way Ben won't have to bear the burden of being a Skywalker by himself."

Luke nodded mutely.

"Just one thing though, Luke," Mara's voice took on a serious tone.

"What is it?"

"If it's a boy, we are definitely not naming him 'Yoda'."

Luke let out a genuine laugh, his worries dissolving as he leaned over give Mara a loving kiss. "Right. Crossing off 'Yoda' from the list. How do you think Ben will react when he learns of his new brother or sister?"

Mara gently took the sleeping Ben Skywalker into her own arms, rocking the toddler with the utmost care. "I think Ben's going to make an excellent brother. I can see it already, just the four of us, in some house by a beach, with not a care in the galaxy."
"I hate to tell you, but you'd be bored stiff, my love," Luke deadpanned.
"Okay, maybe some care," Mara agreed. "But nothing galaxy-threatening. Maybe we can have Lando or Talon toss us an adventure every once and a while. After everything we've been through. I think we've both earned our retirements, though. Our happily ever after."
"To new beginnings and new ends," Luke enfolded his arms around her and his son. Turning his gaze back up to the battle raging in the sky.
"They definitely can't come soon enough," Mara agreed solemnly.
The two of them stood, with Ben protectively held against them, as a cool breeze swept through the field. Interspersed amongst the twinkling stars and dark shadow of Coruscant, the battle went on; with ships and people dying by the second. It was hard to believe that things had to get worse to become better, or that things could ever get better, but neither Mara nor Luke would ever give up hope. The peace that they had fought so long and hard for was near, and soon they could just relax, be a normal Jedi family, leaving politics and war far behind them.
Luke rather liked the idea of shedding his role as Grandmaster, of being rid of the spotlight that the name 'Skywalker' attracted, and of just being a father to his children, a loving husband to his more than deserving wife. He sent a silent thank you through the Force to everyone who would make that future possible for him. To his niece and nephews, to Kyp, to Corran, to the other Jedi on the council.
It was strange to think that it was almost three decades ago that he had been a farmboy from Tatooine, fueled with dreams of joining the rebellion and making a name for himself outside the moisture farm he had grown up in. Never before could he have imagined the impossible journey he would later be caught up in, facing down all manner of creatures and people and swooping about from one side of the galaxy to the next. But there was a definite feeling in the Force, a feeling that his journey was now nearing a different, but no less exciting phase. It was like a dream, having a family of his own. But now he had an opportunity to embrace that adventure to its fullest, without the distraction of a pesky inter-galactic war. Soon, all he would have to worry about was loving Mara, Ben, and their unborn child, caring for them for however long the rest of his life was.
There was a small hesitant sound behind them.

"Yes, Threepio?" Luke smiled.
"I am terribly sorry to interrupt," the golden protocol droid said. "But the technicians have successfully set up the viewing monitors within the command center. Chief of State Cal Omas has personally extended an invitation to the two of you for the purposes of watching the battle unfold."
"We'll be right there," Mara said, burying her nose in the curly hair of her son. "Tell him they can start watching without us."
"I shall do so. But I do hope you will join us soon. With Master Solo and Mistress Leia in the *Falcon,* there is no one stopping the Yuuzhan Vong from eyeing me. I may not be the foremost expert in Yuuzhan Vong body language, but I do believe that several shapers might want to… disassemble me. Maker knows for only what purpose!"
Chuckling at the dramatics in C-3PO's voice, Luke stepped away from Mara. "Alright, Threepio, we'll join you. Can't let any of those shapers go digging around your insides."
"Thank the Maker," C-3PO said, slumping in relief. "Another second in their presence and I am quite certain I would have been doomed."
"When we retire to our dream planet, we can let Han and Leia have Threepio," Mara said in mock whisper.
"I agree," Luke nodded. "Or maybe we can make him the Galactic Alliance ambassador to the Yuuzhan Vong. I'm sure he'll like that."
C-3PO stopped in his tracks and spun around with hands raised in a jerky, comical fashion. "Master Luke, the odds of me surviving the first year among the Yuuzhan Vong without causing a diplomatic incident, given their prejudices against droids and artificial life forms, are …"
"Who knows," Mara said, cutting off the droid. "Maybe you can change those pre-conceived notions about droids one Vong at a time. Show them that you're also a living being."
The banter trailed off when they entered a part of the secured commander center. It was filled with wall-to-wall monitors and displays, each charting the progress of their armed forces. Cal Omas, Taan, Isolder and Teneniel, Moff Saretti, and many of the galaxy's leaders were assembled and watching the fighting unfold with baited breath.
"Master Skywalker," Cal Omas bowed politely.
"Cal," Luke gestured. "You sure it's wise for all the leaders to be gathered in one place?"
"We all figured that if we lose this battle we'd be dead anyway, so why not," Ephin Sarreti remarked with trademark Imperial humor.
"How are we doing?" Mara asked, setting Ben on her lap as she sat down.

"In space, it's a stalemate," Cal Omas said. "Nas Choka is still refusing to commit his forces completely, and we don't want to commit ours in case he has some type of trap set up. The only thing he's done is send a constant stream of reinforcements to the surface of the planet."
"And on the ground?" Mara glanced at a monitor showing the holocamera view from one of Pal'iva Konat's embedded reporters.
The camera was trained on a squadron of stormtroopers and Mandalorians in a fierce firefight against a steady stream of blast and razorbugs. A massive, tri-pedal Fire Breather emerged from around one building and promptly sprayed the area with a blast of gelatinous flame. The reporter managed to get away, but several of the stormtroopers and Mandalorians weren't as fortunate. The Fire Breather set up to belch another load of flame, but then a familiar set of green Manadalorian armor darted across the camera's view.
Boba Fett's rocket pack activated just as the second blast of liquid fire slagged the surrounding area into a glowing heap. The Fire Breather prepared a third attack, the protective sheaths covering its flame-spewing proboscises retracting as the gout of flame began to boil forth. Before it could complete the ignition, however, Boba Fett flew directly in front of the massive beast and fired off two small rockets from his wrist. The rockets flew up and into two of the primary proboscises, and then detonated a split second later. The explosion not only ripped apart the appendages, but caused a chain-reaction that ignited the volatile gaseous mixture that the Fire Breather stored in its stomach. The entire creature, many, many times bigger than Boba, disappeared in a blinding flash. When the flash died away, there was nothing left of the hulking behemoth but burnt out remains.
The camera panned to the side, to reveal several trenches full of soldiers in the fighter of their lives, plasma and molten rock screaming overhead.
"As you can see, the Mandalorians are having one heck of a time trying to breach the lines at the Senate Building," Cal Omas shook his head. "It doesn't help any that Shimrra cause a huge earthquake and created a giant fissure between our forces and the building. As for the other group? They're just getting underway now. Monitors seven through fifteen."
Eyes darted towards the array of screens. A holographic layout of the area appeared in one corner, plotting out where the group was and where they had to go. Overlaid on top of the map, on a separate screen, was the sensor read-outs from fly-bys of the region. It showed the number of life-signs and possible enemy locations.

"That's a lot of Vong," Mara said tersely, seeing her apprentice in one of the camera views nearing the first cluster of defenders. Her tension appeared to waken her child, who promptly made a noise of dissatisfaction. Mara quickly bent down and kissed her son's forehead. "Sorry, Ben."
"Let's hope we trained them well enough to make it through that," Luke whispered, wrapping a supportive arm around his wife.
"We can only hope," Mara breathed. She was unable to close her eyes as the Yuuzhan Vong defenders sprang out of their hiding places and engaged the Jedi and ground forces with them.
The Second Battle for Coruscant had truly begun.
[o-o-[Chapter End]-o-o]
Minor edits: 3 Aug 2013

ADA 67

Sixty-Seven
[o-o-[I]-o-o]
Ganner returned to consciousness with a splitting headache and a very sore back. On the bright side, he mused, at least he was still alive to have a splitting headache and sore back. Peeling himself off of the ground, he took note of his surroundings.
What was left of the transport they had been in had completely disintegrated after barreling through a wall. The bodies of several of the commandos who had been holding on for dear life were scattered haphazardly over the field of metal and stone debris. The shattered hulk of the cockpit showed that neither of the pilots had survived either. Using the Force, he could tell that only five other commandos, out of the six dozen that had been in the transport with him, were still alive.
"That hurt," Valin grimaced. He crawled out from an overturned seat holding an obviously fractured arm to his chest. A trail of blood was smeared down the side of his face from a gash to his head. "Maybe I should have knocked myself out while I was at it."
"I second that," Natua agreed faintly.
Both male Jedi looked up in the direction of her voice. They promptly paled. She was pinned to a stone column by a metal bar that had lanced through her shoulder and through the round pillar.
"That doesn't look at all comfortable, Green Girl," Ganner managed, swallowing to wet his suddenly dry mouth.

"I would definitely appreciate an improvement of my situation," Natua nodded. Both her hands were gripping the metal bar, keeping herself level.
Ganner looked to Valin. "I pull, you catch?"
Valin grimaced. "Yeah."
"Think happy thoughts!" Ganner called out, using the Force to promptly yank the bar from Natua's shoulder.
The Falleen Knight let out a shriek of pain, falling several meters as she did. Valin, unable to use the Force to catch her, reached out with his arms. Unfortunately, both he and Ganner had apparently forgotten that he had one arm fractured in the crash. And the moment she impacted with Valin, they both came crashing to the ground.
"Ouch, ouch," Valin winced, groaning as he fought back the floating stars from his vision.
"That's my line," Natua breathed, trying to steady herself next to Valin's equally prone form.
One of the surviving commandos who had awakened at Natua's cry, tossed over a med-kit. "Here, Bacta patch in the outer pouch."
Natua nodded gratefully, applying the healing bandage to her wound. Valin quickly created a splint out of the metal debris lying about, and soon had his arm securely in place.
In the meantime, Ganner had moved to awaken the other commandos, The Hapan commando Valin had saved earlier was still alive, as were two Chiss, two Galactic Alliance commandos. After a brief survey of the supplies they had on hand, the eight crash survivors promptly gathered around to assess their situation.
"It won't take long for the Vong to come investigate the big bang we made when we crashed," Ganner said in a serious voice.
"Especially since we're in the Senate Building," Valin concurred, deducing the location by the very large writing that said '*Senate Chambers*' over a nearby door.
"On the top floor too, just our luck," the surviving Hapan commando said with a wry grin. "Nothing better than fighting our way through an entire building of scarheads."
"If anything, it'll be you commandos doing the fighting," Ganner said. He gestured to the battered Natua and Valin. "They're wounded."
"Let's see how close the other Jedi and Mandos have gotten. Maybe we can ask them for help," one of the Galactic Alliance commandos said, gesturing to the hole in the wall.
"Definitely can't hurt," Ganner shrugged.
The group climbed over the debris and was treated to a breathtaking view of the entirety of Coruscant. The entire planet looked to be on fire

as the dark clouds in the sky glowed a hellish red, flashing with an occasional burst of lasers or plasma. Distant shrieking of blasterfire could be heard from all around their location, sometimes followed by a dull thud as something exploded. Smoke rose from every corner of the city, the fight for the planet almost awe-inspiring as they just took a moment to take it all in.

Eventually, they turned their attentions to the immediate area. It wasn't the most encouraging of sights.

"Okay, so the Mandos won't be helping us any time soon."

Despite a fierce firefight still occurring, the Mandalorian-led charge against the Senate Building appeared to have ground to a halt. From their vantage point, the crash-survivors could still see the flares of red and yellow energy flying back and forth, but there were at least seven, if not more, Coruscanti city-blocks away. Yuuzhan Vong dropships glided down in front of the Senate Building, offloading more eager warriors to reinforce their brethren.

On the positive side, none of the ground forces seemed to care about the out-of-control transport that had crashed; or they expected no one to survive such a spectacular meeting of ship and building. On the negative, help was definitely going to be a long time, if at all, coming.

"At the rate they're going, they're going to be fighting for this building for weeks," murmured one of the Chiss commandos. "The Vong are too entrenched along the perimeter."

Another seismic quake rocked the ground, and more buildings collapsed sending plumes of dust into the air.

"This planet won't hold up for another few *days*, if Shimrra keeps shaking it," Valin cursed.

"And the Yuuzhan Vong fleet in orbit will definitely keep our own fighters from coming to our aid. We're just fortunate that all the Warmaster is doing is sending in dropships," Natua concurred.

Ganner closed his eyes, reaching out for the nearest Jedi. He made contact with Doran and briefly relayed his situation. After a moment, he nodded and looked back to the others. "New plan. We put the World Brain to sleep ourselves while our buddies outside keep the Vong distracted."

"This is another one of those times when we don't really have a choice, isn't it?" Valin said, though he was nodding in agreement with the plan.

"Not unless we want Shimrra to continuously play god with this planet," Ganner said with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Valin, Green Girl, you've just been recruited to another one of my crazy plans."

"But we're wounded," Natua said, monotonously parroting Ganner's previous assessment of their condition.

"Don't worry, all you'll be doing is putting the World Brain to sleep."
Ganner pulled out his comlink. "Jacen, this is Media Boy, you copy?"
"I read you. Reports said you crashed."
"Into the Senate Building," Ganner confirmed. "Look, when you were on Coruscant last, you were able to interact with the World Brain through the Force, right?"
"Yes. If I concentrate, I can still feel my connection to it. Why?"
"The attack outside won't get to the World Brain any time soon. Fortunately, I'm with Natua, Valin, and five commandos and we're already *inside* the building. If you can do what you can to help, we'll try to use the Force to put the World Brain to sleep instead of Danni's tranquilizers."
"Let me know when you reach the World Brain and I'll do what I can."
"Roger that," Ganner deactivated the comm. "Well, you heard him. Here's the plan. We'll make our way down to the lower levels, where the World Brain is, and use the Force to make it sleep. Of course there will probably be *some* security, so the commandos and I will buy enough time for Valin and Natua to do their thing. Sound good?"
"Far from it," Natua tilted her head. "But it'll have to do."
"That's the spirit," Ganner looked to the commandos. "Ready?"
They stood and nodded. "Always, Jedi Rhysode."
"Good, gather whatever blaster packs you can. You'll probably need every single one of them."
[o-o-[II]-o-o]
"Giant, tank-based laser cannon, fifty. Large mutated voxyn, zero," Jaina said with a sigh, riding on the top of a Galactic Alliance tank. The tank had just turned a bear-sized voxyn into a steaming pile of flesh with a single shot of its main gun. "I wish we had the walkers and tanks on Cato Neimoidia."
In the background, the combined firepower of several AT-ATs and Hapan hover-tanks mowed down another charging horde of the mutated beasts. So far they had only run into scattered resistance and the odd patrol or two that had lost their way during the week of chaos. They knew their good luck wouldn't last, but they also knew to take their victories when they could.
The jagged edges of buildings, walkways, and crashed vehicles lined either side of ruined remains of the Glitannai Esplanade. A plasma barrage during the Yuuzhan Vong invasion had reduced the upper class neighborhood to a smoldering, puddle-filled canyon, deep in the bowels of Coruscant's undercity. It was an uphill trek through rusted metal and crumbling duracrete, filled with more perils than just wild animals. More than once, the path of metal and rocky debris beneath

their feet shifted as distant earthquakes shook the unstable ground. One of the AT-AT's had nearly fallen over the edge, as wide as the path was, and was saved only by the combined power of the Jedi in the group.
The assault force was definitely at a disadvantage. This was no longer their 'home territory,' and the Yuuzhan Vong under Shimrra probably knew the newly shaped streets and alleyways better than anyone. They were also unable to call for air-support. They had traveled several kilometers from their drop-site and were beyond the protective umbrella offered by the X-wings and other fighters that had supported their trip down to the planet. Everywhere one looked, they could see planet-based anti-ship plasma and magma streams shooting off at the distant space battle. Coralskippers also swooped by, but fortunately they were too distracted with the Galactic Alliance fleets to care about the small column of armor very far down in the bowels of Coruscant's undercity.
As the convoy of soldiers and vehicles continued to amble forwards, they couldn't help but steal glances up at the sky. The distant explosions and laser fire seemed so surreal, almost artful even. It was one thing to know that you were fighting for the fate of the entire galaxy. It was another thing entirely to actually comprehend it. The vast array of stars and ships only reminded each of the soldiers of how small they truly were compared to the galaxy at large. How each of them were capable of changing the galaxy one way or another depending on whether they succeeded or failed. It was a definite nerve-wracking experience once those ideas finally sunk in.
"I wish I had the tanks too," Tahiri said, seated with Anakin atop her *rakamat* from Borleias, Little Bantha.
Several of the large flying raptor-like creatures that the strike team encountered on Cato Neimoidia let out screeches as they made a dive-bombing run from above. They spiraled gracefully around metal girders and shattered walkways with lethal intent.
Immediately, the maser-cannons atop the Chiss APCs tracked upwards and blasted the creatures apart with a steady dose of blue energy.
"I'd wish the Yuuzhan Vong would quit sending these creatures in as fodder though," Jacen sighed, shaking his head. He was riding one of the rancors brought in by Teneniel, next to Tenel Ka's own rancor mount. "It's accomplishing nothing and really is a waste of life. What's worse is that the creatures really don't know any better, they're just doing as the World Brain is telling them to."
"Regret not doing more when you were last on Coruscant?" Tenel Ka said with a curious tilt of her head.

"I did what I could at the time," Jacen shrugged. "I hadn't counted on Shimrra to be so completely out of his mind that he'd sacrifice the very planet than let anyone else have it. Then again, I couldn't have done much more apart from killing the World Brain. I was too far away from it and didn't have the time to earn its trust or convince it to be my friend."
"Then let us hope Ganner and the others are able to do just that," Tenel Ka replied evenly.
Jacen nodded wearily. Through the meld, he reached out to Ganner, Natua, and Valin, mentally relaying what needed to be done in order for them to communicate with the World Brain. He wanted to give the three as much information as he could, while he wasn't focused on running or fighting for his life. It was a good thing that Valin had a similar affinity for living creatures, and that Natua's logical thought processes made giving the instructions all the more easier. They had the matter under their control. It was up to them to get a handle on the World Brain. Once they did, all of the creatures the Yuuzhan Vong relied on for support would be neutralized in a painless and non-lethal manner.
"All units, hold," Anakin announced, as his and Tahiri's enhanced Vongsense picked up a great gathering of Yuuzhan Vong warriors around the canyon's next turn. They were still a little over five kilometers away, but the presence of Yuuzhan Vong was so great that it was easily detectable.
The automated Spider Walkers from the Tion Hegemony ambled to the front of the line, as a fleet of speeder-bike mounted soldiers hovered on the wings. The rest of the force stopped in their tracks while their commanders and the other Jedi made their way over to the Solos.
Jacen analyzed what he was sensing and moved alongside Anakin and Tahiri's *rakamat*. "In addition to the warriors, there's something *really* big in the direction we're headed."
"We knew it wouldn't be easy," Anakin remarked.
"According to the latest topological scans, the entrance to the temple district is just around a sharp corner five and a half klicks straight ahead," Tahiri said, looking through a holomap. "It'd make sense that it would be heavily defended."
"They have to know that we're coming," General Jamiro said. "It'd be hard to miss an armored column marching down one of the only ways into the place. I'm only surprise that we haven't run into heavier resistance."
"Agreed."

"Then again, the upcoming bent-axis approach is going to be a pain for our people," Jaina said, joining the discussion. "They'll slaughter us the moment we turn the corner."
"You have an idea?" Anakin looked to his sister.
Jaina nodded. "We have the infantry scale the walls, get to an upper level, and unleash our heavy weapons on whatever is around the corner. While the infantry do that, the armor continue around the corner and take advantage of the chaos."
"Let's have the speeders scout on ahead first," Jacen said cautiously. "We might not be sensing anything else in the Force, or Vongsense, but it wouldn't hurt. Also, they could trigger some sort of passive trap our senses aren't detecting."
"Good idea," General Jamiro agreed. He made a gesture, and the commander of the speeder bike division maneuvered his way through the army and to their side.
"Sir?"
"Colonel, we're going to need a few of your men to scout the stretch of road ahead. The Jedi aren't picking up anything, but it's better to err on the side of caution."
"Understood," the Scout Trooper said with a professional nod of his head. "I'll get right on it."
Olee Starstone, on a speeder bike of her own, looked to the others. "I'll join them. Perhaps Jedi eyes might see something they'll miss."
The speeder bike colonel relayed the plan to several other bikes. They joined up with Olee and the group proceeded cautiously down the stretch of road. Minutes ticked by in nervous silence, the group only relaxing when they saw the speeders bikes return.
One of the speeder bikes pulled up alongside Jaina's tank, and she noddd curtly. "Report."
"All clear ma'am. Just the same amount of debris we've been seeing since we started the mission," the speeder bike rider replied. "Didn't see any hostiles, but the path does become narrower about three klicks in, a lot narrower. We'll have to limit the walkers to two across instead of our current eight. The gap on either side becomes wider and there's a break in the debris on either side of the canyon as well. If you ask me, that stretch of road looks like a giant bridge more than anything. The way down is pretty far, but the other side was just as clear of hostiles as the rest of the path."
"That's strange," Jaina murmured, looking to her brothers. "A choke point with no force on the opposite side. And they'd have the higher ground too."
"Ideas?" The Solos looked to the other Jedi and commanders.

"At any rate, it'll be safer for the infantry to split up from the walkers and tanks," General Jamiro said. "If the Yuuzhan Vong know we're coming, the tanks are only going to be magnets for plasma fire.
"It is possible that they have artillery units locked in at that narrow juncture," Hapan General Livette said. "They lure us in by making it seem like the choke point is clear, and then pound the area with plasma."
"I agree," a Chiss commander nodded. "History has shown us that the Yuuzhan Vong act like predators in battle. Luring and traps would be within their repertoire of tricks."
"There is something else," senior Jedi, Olee Starstone spoke up. "There might not have been any active threats, but when I was there and used the Force to analyze my surroundings I found a passive threat."
"Passive?" Anakin questioned.
"Yes," Olee said. "And the flashback to my childhood days as an apprentice caused by this threat, was most amusing. In fact, that was why I was specifically looking for passive threats in the first place. The Yuuzhan Vong have released some type of aerosol that will scatter and dissipate blasterfire. Expect your weapons, especially those on the infantry level, to have problems functioning."
"Will the aerosol work on masers and paddle-beamers?" The Chiss commander asked.
Olee raised a graying eyebrow. "I do not believe so. In the Clone Wars, we did not have such weapons at our disposal, so I cannot be certain."
"Then at least we'll try it out. Since the Hutts' people use slug and bolt-throwers, and the Freed Yuuzhan Vong warriors use their amphistaff and bug collection, they should be unaffected as well. We'll stick to the Jedi Solos' plan of deploying infantry into the canyon walls, but instead of using your blaster equipped soldiers, we'll send my people, the P'w'eck, the Hutt soldiers, and the Freed Yuuzhan Vong instead."
"What about the two kilometer gap between the opposite sides of the bridge the troopers saw?" Jaina asked.
"We can use the tow-cables fired from the OG-15s," the Tion Hegemony commander replied. "They have that length in cable solely for the purpose of situations like that. We'll establish an anchor on one side of this bridge, and fire the cables to the other side. Commander Nuruodo's men and the others should be able to use that to cross the chasm without actually using the bridge itself."
"And the tanks?" Jacen said.
"To keep our heavy armor from being hit by artillery all at once, we'll send them over only a couple at a time," General Jamiro said. "The rest of the infantry, Hapan tanks, and Dathomiri rancors can be first, since

they're faster, followed by the Chiss APCs and AT-STs. Freed Yuuzhan Vong *rakamat* can cross with the AT-ATs only if the others haven't come under fire by then. It's risky, but it's the only way we'll get across in any timely manner. We don't have the time to go around and find an alternate route."
"Sounds like a plan." The Solos all nodded to one and other.
"Okay then," Jacen took in a breath and released it. "Let's move out."
[o-o-[III]-o-o]
Ganner Rhysode's eyes darted left and right as he guided the seven others through the eerily vacant Senate Building. The sounds of explosions and blasterfire from the fight outside thudded and boomed mutedly within the massive structure's stone walls. Their initial explorations of the building had revealed just how great a makeover it had undergone in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong.
Most of the interior metal and stone walls had been replaced with thick plates of black, hardened coral. Hallways were demolished, and rebuilt in an almost random fashion, with some leading both upwards and downwards with no adherence to the building's initial floor-plan. The organic pathways wove about each other like strands of a basket, the purple and orange of the coral a definite change to the normally bright red and blue carpeting that had once lined the duracrete floors. And it was hard not to glance out of the occasional battle-inflicted hole in the wall, knowing that all your allies and friend were outside fighting for their lives.
Their initial plan, to enter the Grand Convocation Chamber where the World Brain was via one of the many side doors that had been used by senators of ages past, had been foiled by the fact that all of these side doors no longer existed. It was as if a giant yorik coral shell had been plopped down right in the center of the magnificent chamber, blocking all entry save for the main path at the front of the building. Going through the shell was not an option. The coral was so thick that their lightsabers would have taken all day just to create a person-sized hole. This meant that their only other course of action was to enter the Convocation Chamber via the senate atrium; which was in plain view of the large amount of Yuuzhan Vong defenders on the outside of the building. There was little doubt that they'd be seen, but there wasn't much they could do about it. From Doran's reports both Force-messages and comlink, the Jedi/Mandalorian attack had actually been pushed back another couple of blocks as more of Nas Choka's reinforcements were brought in. The eight inside the Senate Building were on their own, and were the last hope of the Galactic Alliance. On

the bright side, Doran's attack seemed to have drawn out every single guard within, leaving the path to the atrium confrontation-free.
A distant rumbling indicated that Shimrra was once again causing seismic activity with the World Brain's gravitational powers. Lightning forked in the sky all around the building as thick storm clouds began to unleash downpours onto the gritty battlefield.
"Five more floors to go until we reach the bottom," Ganner said softly. "Or five more, if the Yuuzhan Vong haven't remodeled any of the remaining floors."
"Any idea on how we're going to get into the inner chambers without being seen?" Natua said in a low voice, as they stealthily, but hastily, sprinted through the empty hallways of the building.
"Still working on that," Ganner said, his face uncharacteristically serious. "If it comes down to it, you and the commandos will have to enter the Well of the World Brain yourselves. If I remember my history lessons correctly, the Chief of State's office was located directly under the Convocation Chamber, so you can use it to get out of the building when you're done."
"And you?" Natua's eyes were narrowed. They were on level with the heads of some of the statues that oversaw the ground floor, a single grand staircase was all that was left of their downward trek.
Ganner offered the first sincere smile he had smiled in a very long time. It was a sad smile, but also tinged with the humor he was known for. "Someone has to buy you the time you need to talk with the World Brain."
Natua and Valin both looked at him sharply. "Ganner?"
"You've said it yourselves, you two are injured," Ganner said gently, a distant explosion sounding extremely faint in the background. "Someone has to convince the World Brain that this battle is lost. That it's time to retire. You two are better at the nature stuff anyways. I'd only offend the giant planet-controlling brain. I mean, can you just imagine the consequences if I get on a giant brain's bad-side?"
Despite his words, Natua's hurt and frustration was loud and clear in the Force. With a small sigh, Ganner very tenderly reached out and rubbed her back, using the Force to provide as much comfort as he could. "Hey, I'm not dead yet, Green Girl. Do you really think that an army of Yuuzhan Vong can take down me, Ganner Rhysode, god of insanity?"
Natua looked away, not answering. Valin likewise looked as if he had swallowed something unpleasant, a fork of lightning outside temporarily highlighting the jagged scar across the bridge of his nose. He stepped towards the older Jedi, wanting to object, "Ganner."

"We're here," Ganner said as the descended the last step of the last staircase. On their right was the shattered glass façade of the Senate Building, the cool wind whipped up by the artificial rain-storm bringing with it the smell of smoke and death into the atrium. On their left were two giant doors, each as magnificent in size and design as the rest of the building. They appeared to be the only thing in the atrium left untouched by the Yuuzhan Vong, with the walls, banisters, and ceiling coated in yorik coral and other organic matter.

Directly outside, an entire brigade of Yuuzhan Vong was disembarking from another transport, a commander yelling in his guttural tongue with vigor and fanatic excitement.

"Take my lightsaber," Natua whispered in a low voice, unclipping her weapon and handing it to him. "You'll need all the help you can get, even if you are a god."

Ganner tried to hand it back, but Natua just glared at him until he accepted it with a pained smile.

"Are you sure you don't want us to stay out here with you?" The Hapan commando asked.

Ganner shook his head, clipping her lightsaber next to his. "Take position on the other side of the chamber doors, you'll have more cover."

"Ganner," Valin said again. "Are you sure this is okay? You could come with us."

Ganner stretched his arms out and gazed about the atrium with a half-smile on his face. His eyes twinkling with silent mirth. "Now where would the fun be in that? I wouldn't be able to play hero then. You know as well as I do that the moment those door hinges creak, all the Vong out there will be coming in here. Someone has to slow them down."

"This is no laughing matter," Natua hissed.

"Oh, I'm not laughing, really," Ganner said, sobering. He reached out and touched the base of one of the statues. "For some reason, just now, this place seemed so familiar to me. And not just the Senate Building, but this very room, in this very state. Even though I've never been here before, I feel a connection to it. It's like the Force is telling me that I'm *meant* to be here. That this has always been my destiny no matter what. If I go with you, the Vong will win, the Force is telling me that for sure. We won't get another chance at the World Brain, not in time to save the others."

Natua's face became stony as the Falleen struggled to internalize her emotions. Valin simply looked down, clenching the fist of his badly fractured arm in anger. Both of the younger Knights hated agreeing

with Ganner, because it normally meant an insane but fun idea. His latest idea was definitely insane, but there was not an ounce of fun to be found.
"Come on," Ganner coaxed softly. "The longer we stand here, the bigger a chance we have of being spotted before we get those doors open."
"Go out with a smile," Natua said, her voice soft as she stepped forward and hugged him tightly. "It's what you taught me, remember?"
"Yeah," Ganner grinned, patting her back. She stepped away, looking lost as she did. "I definitely will."
"Any last words for the others?" Valin said, his eyes suspiciously wet. "For your biography?"
Ganner smiled almost regretful. "Tell Anakin that it was a blast following him, and that if I could do everything all over again, I wouldn't change a single thing. And," the playful glint returned to his eyes. "Make sure that in my biography, they list my cause of death as an act of the Senate."
"Ganner Rhysode, a man so great, it took the full weight of the Senate to get rid of him," Natua narrated monotonously.
Ganner nodded once, his eyes sparkling as he grinned broadly. "Now let's say we get this party started?"
"No time like the present," Valin exhaled.
Ganner held out both hands, and with a very loud screech, the unused doors of the Convocation Chamber swung open. The doors bounced off the side walls with a very resounding bang, echoing loudly and shaking dust free from all corners of the atrium.
As one, the Yuuzhan Vong outside turned to look into the building.
"Jeedai!"
"Go!" Ganner yelled. The two Knights and five commandos took off through the open door without another look back.
Slowly, Ganner back-stepped until he was in the center of said doorway. The Yuuzhan Vong flooded into the atrium to fill in the vacuum his presence left. For several long moments, both sides stared at each other in silence. The only sounds came from the battle raging on all around outside. It was as if they were in the center of a storm, insulated from everything else that was occurring.
More Yuuzhan Vong were filling the atrium by the second, far surpassing the numbers Ganner had faced on Palanhi so long ago. Hundreds, thousands, filling every square inch of the sprawling plaza until it looked as if a single, giant entity stood before the lone Jedi.
"You there, what are you doing here?" One of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors snarled menacingly.

The answer was deep, a mockingly cheerful growl. "Isn't it obvious, I'm standing in your way."

[o-o-[IV]-o-o]

Giant Vong-shaped armored serpents were just as deadly on the ground as they were in space. Especially if one was special enough to be one-of-a-kind, was considered Yun-Yammka's divine beast, and had its own name in both Yuuzhan Vong and Basic. That's what Jaina, Jacen, Anakin, and the rest of the forces they were leading quickly discovered when they began to cross a two kilometer stretch of uphill road that spanned a gaping chasm.

They had been prepared for many things, but not for the creatures known by Galactic Alliance forces as Biter and Beater.

Everything had started out fine. The Tion Consortium's OG-15 Spider Walkers were able to successfully fire their tow-cables into the opposite side of the stretch, and the Chiss and non-blaster using allies used those cables to scamper into the ruins on the other side of the chasm. Speeder Bike troopers then went across the bridge first, securing the opposite side and giving another 'all-clear.' The tanks and lighter assault vehicles went next. Despite their fears, no devastating artillery barrage rained down from above, and no explosives beneath the bridge detonated.

With only a half kilometer remaining until the group reached the all important temple district, the journey across the bridge was a bit too easy. Anti-laser aerosols aside, there hadn't even been any voxyn attacks or warrior ambushes to make their trip harder.

The rest of the infantry ran up ahead of the heavy walkers, braving the stretch of exposed road made of compacted metal and rocky debris. And still nothing happened.

"The moment of truth," Jacen whispered from atop his rancor mount, twisting his head to look back over his shoulder at the AT-AT's and other heavy armor. He, Anakin, and Tahiri were keeping a close watch on the nearly overwhelming number of Yuuzhan Vong life signs they could sense just a klick away.

The lumbering walkers and slow-moving tanks of their column began to streamline themselves along the length of road. The tensions were high, as the attackers knew full well that if there was a time for the Yuuzhan Vong to act, it would be while their strongest weapons were at their most vulnerable.

They weren't wrong.

It didn't take a Jedi to feel the entire ground shaking beneath their feet; and this time the vibrations weren't caused by one of Shimrra's earthquakes. The Supreme Overlord, however, *was* responsible for a

sudden change in weather. Dark and menacing storm clouds coalesced in the air above them, gathering from out of nowhere, with clashes of thunder rumbling almost deafeningly above the group. The ground continued to shake, and all the Jedi could sense a giant threat in the Force.
"That's…big," Anakin swallowed, eyes wide as the head of what looked like a giant, frilled, heavily armored, black snake rounded the corner. Just the head of the snake alone was larger than an entire starfighter, with the plating and jagged frills that surrounded it making the creature's military purpose fairly clear.
It took one look at the mass of armored vehicles before it and let out what could only be described as an enraged howl. It thrashed about, a giant tail sweeping through the side-walls of the canyon and tearing apart the ruined durasteel and duracrete frames of buildings with utter ease. It swept its tail to the opposite side, cleaving very large and noticeable hole, and sending debris flying everywhere.
"That's *Tu-Scart*! And the creature on its tail is *Sgauru*!" One of the Freed Ones on Little Brother whispered in abject despair. "Yun-Yammka's most blessed creatures, a destroyer of cities! We're all going to die!"
"No we're not!" Tahiri said, though her green eyes were round in shock.
The black, snake-like creature pulsed forward around the corner, revealing twenty meters of sheer muscle, thick, spiky scales, and an obvious distaste for anything metal as it continued to thrash in agitation. And clinging onto its tail was another creature, its white, segmented form standing out against the dark scales of its host. It was very clear why the Freed One had called the pair a destroyer of cities. Giant didn't even begin to describe them. The enormous snake let out another screeching roar and began to barrel down on the armored column at frightening speed.
"Open fire!" Multiple commanders yelled.
Tanks, walkers, soldiers, speeders, and every single vehicle in the armored column unleashed a barrage of devastating energy towards the rampaging monstrosity. The energy and super-heated projectiles only seemed to bounce off of the creatures ablative scales, doing little more than to increase its fury. It closed the gap between the two sides and promptly unleashed a wave of destruction comparable to its size. It's massive, bony head became a battering ram, slamming into the front of the column and sending tanks and smaller walkers flying every which way as if they were children's toys. For its size, it was very maneuverable, whipping about and causing all manner of chaos. Its

weighted tail lashed out and slamming into the column of AT-AT's crossing the chasm. In a chain reaction, two toppled over into the two next to them, and soon six of the eighteen walkers were sent tumbling off the side of the uphill climb.

The giant snake placed itself right on the end of the bridge, blocking retreat for the light-armor and advancement for the heavy. It lashed out again, crushing four tanks beneath its weight, even as everyone began pouring fire onto it. Another tail flick, and a slow moving Spider Walker was smashed to the ground.

But the armored column gave back all they could. Concentrated barrages of tank-fire began wearing away the heavily armored serpent. Infantry, with anti-vehicle weapons such as the P'w'eck beam cannon, peppered the snake whenever they could with rockets and high-intensity energy fire. Glowing wounds began to appear, and pieces of spiky scales began to fly into the air as tank shells and heavy laser cannons continued to drill the creature.

"Aim for the head!" General Livette directed with some urgency. Despite the wounds they were inflicting, it was taking out tanks and walkers three, four, five at a time. The next barrage of lasers and super-heated metal battered the thick skull of the serpent, causing it to strike out once more.

"Ma'am, enemy infantry on approach!" another soldier called back, gesturing wildly back towards the temple district.

While everyone else had been busy trying to just survive the latest Yuuzhan Vong attack, the warriors had advanced their own people. Dozens of *rakamat* and hundreds of their Chazrach slave-soldiers were running towards the broken lines of armor, and two battalions of Yuuzhan Vong warriors were advancing behind them. Blaze bugs, plasma blasts, razor and thud bugs, all filled the air only seconds later. The anti-laser aerosols were having a detrimental effect on most of the Galactic Alliance infantry, scattering blaster shots, causing friendly-fire, and otherwise making their weapons useless. Those who could still fight and shoot were outgunned many times over. It was almost as if Shimmra's Yuuzhan Vong were making every last Chazrach slave soldier that they had fight to the death.

Caught between a giant, thrashing snake, and a hoard of mindless and zealous infantry, the situation only deteriorated when magma artillery shells finally began raining down on the area.

"It's a trap!" General Jamiro yelled out. More tanks and vehicles were set aflame, or disappearing in balls of shrapnel, with no end to the chaos in sight. Several speeder bike troopers were pulled off their

bikes by well-timed jumps, while one of the Dathomiri rancors and its rider vanished from a direct magma strike.
"Have the walkers fall back!" Jacen yelled over the deafening battle. His rancor wasn't helping any by swatting aside several Chazrach that had tried to poke at it with spears. "We can't get bogged down here! Everyone else has to advance! We need to get to more open ground!"
The Galactic Alliance ground commander quickly rattled off the message. Infantry capable of disengaging, promptly climbed onto the nearest vehicle, and engines were revved as the Galactic Alliance force began to reorganize itself.
Three of the Chiss APCs swung about and took off at high velocity, running over a swath of charging Chazrach in the process. A Hapan hover-tank charged an enemy *rakamat* with guns blazing, spooking the creature and causing it to buck uncontrollably. One by one, the armored units began to punch through the enemy forces, turning many into road-kill in the process. As strong as the Yuuzhan Vong line was, even *they* would break when several thousand tons of machine, rancor, and *rakamat*, were barreling in an almost suicidal fashion, directly at them.
Tanks , APCs and light-walkers made the initial hole, with speeders, speeder bikes, and infantry, frantically pushing through the enemy lines while they could. Their brute-force method was crude, but effective, the armored vehicles blasting through *rakamat*, Flame Breathers, and whatever else the Yuuzhan Vong could field in a frenzied rush forward.
Sensing its quarry escaping, the gigantic snake *Tu-Scar*t quickly uncoiled from the end of the bridge and made to pursue. In doing so, however, it completely ignored the ranks of Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong, *rakamat*, and Chazrach in its way. Ignored—meaning it didn't care if they got in the away as it steamrolled out of control through the Glitannai Canyon. Slower Galactic Alliance vehicles and personnel were crushed beneath it, but alarmed Yuuzhan Vong and Chazrach were likewise mowed down. Added to *Tu-scart's* anger was the incessant magma artillery still raining down, occasionally flaring off of its thick black scales.
Fortunately, the Jedi in the fleet above Coruscant picked up on the distress of the Jedi on the ground. And in spite of the area being full of anti-ship emplacements, with the added threat of having an entire Yuuzhan Vong fleet overhead, a comm-message came in from the preeminent fighter squadron of the Galactic Alliance.

"Citadel Strike Force, this is Rogue Leader, Rogue Squadron is coming in for a single pass with the Veila at the request of Jedi Knight Hellin. Where do you need us?"
"Rogue Leader," Jaina breathed, her lightsaber deflecting several thud-bugs. Her hair fluttered behind her as she spun around and used the Force to hurl a burnt-out tank into the mass of Chazrach and Yuuzhan Vong in front of her. "If you can spot the giant snake, by all means, blast it to pieces."
"Giant…oh," Gavin Darklighter trailed off as he spotted the target Jaina was indicating. *"I copy Sticks, locking on to the giant snake. We'll clear out the Vong positions around the corner from you free of charge as well."*
"Appreciated."
There was a ground shaking roar as a squadron of X-wings and one hybrid pleasure yacht flew by overhead with guns blazing. They braved the plethora of anti-starcraft fire and pursuing squadrons of coralskippers that lit up the darkened Coruscanti sky with yellow streams of non-stop plasma with daredevil maneuvers unmatched by any. The moment they were in range, they unleashed a torrent of destructive energy on the large Yuuzhan Vong creature and surrounding areas.
Though *Tu-Scart* may have been able to endure the fire from the ground vehicles, the constant barrages had weakened its protective scales. The combined fire of the twelve quad-lasers from all of Rogue Squadron, and the plasma bursts from a very protective *Veila* were enough to effectively blow the behemoth in half.
The large snake was still alive, but the attack had been enough to halt it completely in its tracks. The creature that had been attached to *Tu-Scart*'s tail was promptly flung away from the rest of the body, smashing through the artificial canyon wall and disappearing out of sight.
A torpedo was released at the entrance of the temple district, turning the air around the waiting plasma cannons and warriors into a fiery blaze. The fighters and yacht then pulled up at high-speeds, still trying to shake the multiple coralskipper squadrons that were now blasting the air around them with equally deadly bursts of plasma.
"*The rest is up to you, Citadel taskforce. You're on your own. This area's a bit too hot, even for us Rogues."*
"Thanks for the assist anyways," Jaina acknowledged, deactivating her lightsaber as the Yuuzhan Vong withdrew back around the last corner. With the main threat gone, the remaining AT-ATs and other heavy vehicles once again began to advance, pushing through the small

battlefield choked with corpses and burnt out vehicles. Finally, the tanks and walkers reached their objective, a flat, open clearing that was dotted with Yuuzhan Vong structures of all sorts. Most of the buildings had been destroyed in the week of rioting, still smoldering from flames that had yet to be put out.

The ten-block long stretch was lined with statues of the various gods lining a processional way all the way up to the former Imperial Palace. The ruins of the building, from which Shimrra's citadel rose up high, was bathed in shadow and darkness as Zonama Sekot continued to deny Coruscant the light from its faint sun.

What was left of the Yuuzhan Vong defenders quickly regrouped in front of the opposing building for one final stand. A couple of the walkers and tanks fired off rounds, but the trademark void-defenses of the Yuuzhan Vong flared to life.

"Void defenses, they can fire at us, but we can't fire at them," Tahiri pointed out.

"We go by foot then," Anakin shrugged, as both he and Tahiri dismounted from Little Brother. "Decrease the target size."

Others did the same as the larger vehicles and walkers quickly scattered to minimize the chances of collateral damage.

The Jedi in the taskforce quickly made their way up to the front, staring down the thousands of Yuuzhan Vong that awaited them just inside the impenetrable barrier. Forming up behind the Jedi were the soldiers from nearly every corner of the galaxy.

"The Vong aren't firing?" General Jamiro said in confusion.

"There is less honor in that sort of fighting," Czalpak, the Freed Yuuzhan Vong ground commander said, stepping forward. "They'll shoot if we do. But they will fight with amphistaff and coufee first."

"Not like half of our blasters work anyways," General Livette shrugged.

"We'll lead the charge," Jaina said, pulling out her lightsaber and slowly walking down the final stretch of road. Her brothers fell into stride just behind her on either side, flanked by Tenel Ka and Tahiri.

Zekk, Tesar, and Lowbacca formed up into a third row, and a fourth row, made up of Jysella and Bazel at the wings, had Kam Solusar, Olee Starstone, and Tionne in the center. Other Jedi joined in, turning the formation into a sword-shaped wedge with Jaina Solo as the tip.

The non-Jedi soldiers fixed bayonets onto the ends of their blasters or drew vibroweapons of all sorts. Several of the surviving Dathomiri even uncurled energy whips, while an eclectic array of weapons could be seen in the hands of the Hutt-allied mercenaries. The soldiers all moved into position behind the Jedi, weapons at the ready.

Jaina glanced over her shoulder to smirk at each of her brothers. "Jace, Little Brother."
"Jaya," Anakin grinned faintly.
"Lets finish this," Jacen nodded once.
Jaina returned the gesture, gripped her lightsaber tightly, and set into a determined stride towards the Imperial Palace. She started off slowly at first, breaking into a light jog as the alien buildings and sculptures passed her by. Gradually, she began to pick up speed, her breathing calm as the Force kept her centered. Her eyes were focused on the distant lines of warriors, all armed with amphistaffs, organic blades, and all manner of natural weaponry.
Eight blocks left.
Seven.
Her heart pounded in her chest.
Six.
Her mind flashed back to all of her friends, her family, and those who died so she could be where she was at that moment.
Five blocks to go.
The adventures, the fears, the joys, everything she had gone through throughout the past four years of the war.
Four blocks left.
A statue of Yun-Harla, made of the scraps of New Republic ships, looked down at her with an upturned face. Jaina passed it, her footsteps pounding on the metal and earthen ground as she began to run in earnest.
Three blocks
Two blocks.
She could make out individual faces of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors awaiting their charge, every bit as determined as she was.
One block.
Jaina activated her lightsaber and let out a battle cry of defiance and purpose. The cry was picked up by everyone else in a deafening crescendo as they plunged head-long into the lines of Yuuzhan Vong warriors.
[o-o-[V]-o-o]
Ganner Rhysode didn't feel a single iota of fear as he continued to stand in the middle of the towering doorway. He felt nothing but calmness, feeling the Force gather around him almost supportively as he stared down the rather burly crowd in front of him,
"There are *thousands* of warriors out here!" One of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors said in disbelief. "Stand aside! You cannot hope to stop us."

"I don't have to stop you. All I have to do is slow you down," Ganner shrugged, tossing his unlit lightsaber back and forth in his hands. "You are just one *Jeedai*. Even you cannot stand against all of us. We will cut you down where you stand."
"Okay," Ganner held up a finger. "First off. I'm not really a Jedi."
"You wield their sword."
"Oh, this old thing?" Ganner glanced at his lightsaber. "You have a point. But that doesn't make me a Jedi. You see, let me tell you a little secret: even if I have a Jedi sword, I'm only pretending to be one."
"Pretending to be a *Jeedai?*"
"Exactly," Ganner jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "My friends, the ones talking with the World Brain and slaying your Supreme Overlord, *they're* the real Jedi, the real heroes. They're the ones who'll have stories written about them and babies named after them for generations. I just pretend."
"Then you have even less of a chance against us."
"You want to know the good thing about pretending?" Ganner said, completely ignoring the warrior. "If you pretend hard enough, you can be anyone you want to be. Put your mind to it, and you can do anything. Neat huh?"
"Last warning, step aside."
"Okay, one last thing then. You see, against all you strong, capable, very ugly, warriors, if I pretended to be a Jedi, to be a hero, you'd probably win. Only a real hero would walk away from this in one piece. So I sadly have to be the only person I really am."
"And that is?"
"You have to ask?" Ganner held up his lightsaber with one hand and gestured with the other. "Jedi, hero, movie star, take all those away and you're left with the one and only Ganner Rhysode. That's right, *the* Ganner Rhysode. Now you want me to move? Come on and move me!"
"You truly are insane," the warrior recoiled, the entire line of warriors taking several steps back.
"That's right," Ganner chuckled, a happy light in his eyes. He activated his lightsaber, the sound of it, and its bright glow, causing the warriors to retreat another step. "That's me. Ganner Rhysode, god of swollen egos and insanity."
Ganner spun his lightsaber in a dazzlingly complex flourish, scoring the ground and doorframe and sending shadows dancing across the thousands of warriors in front of him. When he was finished, a glowing line of heated rock and metal decorated the doorframe and ground in front of him.

The warriors seemed transfixed by the moving blade, their eagerness to engage having faded with the revealing of his identity.
"Decided to make a fancier Line of Rhysode this time," Ganner remarked glibly. "You say you have thousands? Well, feel free to bring them on, one at a time or all in a rush. None shall pass."
The warriors all looked to each other, fear clear on some of their faces as they seemed unable to believe that any one man would be so suicidal to stand without any hesitation in the face of all of them. Maybe the rumors were true, that he *was* a god, and that he had no fear because he could not be slain.
One of the Domain commanders made an annoyed sound at the back of his throat.
"He is still only one man!"
The tall, scarred warrior charged Ganner, amphistaff spinning about. Ganner stepped forward, side-stepped the initial thrust, and with a single sweep of his saber, decapitated the warrior.
Another ran at Ganner. The Jedi blocked the first few aggressive strikes, then swept low, slicing the warrior's legs off. Before the warrior finished his downward journey to the ground, Ganner jammed his lightsaber into the warrior's face, ending his challenger's life.
And then, one by one, more warriors stepped up and were cut down. Ganner flowed around or blocked each attack. In the darkness of the atrium his saber was the sole source of light. One up, one down. A constant blur of motion, humming with every sweep, sparking with every parry.
Bodies began to fill the gap between Ganner and the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors. Time seemed to stretch on forever. With every one warrior falling, another took his place, eager for his chance to slay a god. But Ganner remained unmoved from his position. Still warriors fell at his blade. Five, then ten, then twenty, one by one he dispatched them all.
And then they came two at a time.
And then four.
And then eight.
Ganner holds his ground, cutting down one after another. The only things one hears is the sound of his lightsaber flowing through the air and meeting flesh or amphistaff. His movements are guided by the Force, strong and confident. He has no doubt, no fear. If this is his end, he'll gladly accept it. He is more than ready for whatever awaits him once he rejoins the Force. But first, he has a job to do.
He lets Natua's lightsaber fly into his off-hand, and its brilliant light joins with his saber as he fights on.

The warriors now scramble over piles of their dead to reach him, slipping on the blood of their comrades. They arrive at their target only to be cut down a second later, their bodies joining the rampart of dead that lay in front of him.
He is a whirlwind, an unstoppable force dancing with death. He uses the Force to whip up a lethal storm of debris, turns the statues that had lined the atrium into missiles that slam warriors every which way. Amphistaffs bite into him, but the Force boils away the venom and his lightsaber slices away the offending limbs. A constant sizzle fills the air as Ganner cleaves through one Yuuzhan Vong after another.
Lessons he had learned in the past flicker through his mind.
A Jedi doesn't show off.
Fighting is not a game.
When blood must be shed, a Jedi does so quickly, surgically
One out of three isn't so bad, Ganner smiles to himself. No wonder he's such a terrible Jedi.
His smile only serves to unnerve the warrior he os facing, and Ganner promptly jams the glowing blade of his saber into the warrior's neck while blocking another attack with Natua's. The memories continue to flash in his mind's eye, his life unfolding before him.
Ganner, I can still hear you breathing back there. Go! Now, Go! You're the only one who can save them!
Before I got this scratch, it was easy to believe in my own invincibility...That's not an illusion I harbor anymore.
The leader has to be someone they won't be too worried about—and someone they'll believe could be duped by a traitor. Someone like me."
If by acting as a fool, I can make the galaxy a brighter place, if only for an instant, then it's worth it.
He fights on, oblivious to the numerous wounds he had picked up, to his own flagging strength. He had lost track of the number that had fallen to his blades. Lost track of the time that had passed. Minutes, hours, he no longer knows, no longer cares. His only goal is to buy enough time for his friends to do what had to be done. Buy enough time for the war to end. So that everyone could smile, even without his bad jokes to brighten the day.
The warriors continue to press on through the doorway, only to be stopped before crossing the line he had drawn on the ground.
He would keep his word, they would not pass.
Amphistaff, coufee, spiked blades of all sorts tear into his armored jumpsuit, ripping it to shreds and biting into his skin.
He still fights on, downing another dozen warriors in a spiraling flurry of motion. His blood begins to paint the floor beneath his boots, and the

walls around him, his breathing becomes more and more labored as the Force begins to boil away the cells of his body.
Much like how Anakin and Tahiri began to glow on Myrkr, so too did Ganner. A wild nimbus of energy and light beating back the darkness as he resists every push, wins every challenge, and cuts down all who come before him.
And then…there is no one left to fight.
An absolute silence fills the atrium once more as Ganner stands atop a mountain of dead. The Force continues to burn brightly as he pants, dizzy from the amphistaff venom and scores of wounds that decorate his body. From his vantage point, he could see another Yuuzhan Vong dropship release another wave of warriors.
They stream into the atrium, and then pause at the sight before them. One of them calls out, and a rumbling AT-AT-sized beast pushes through the worn durasteel frame of the front of the atrium.
Ganner, as tired as he is, simply smiles from atop the mountain of dead. It figures they would finally bring in the big-guns.
As the Force continues to burn away at his body, he closes his eyes, rallying the last of his strength. He reaches out to the duracrete and steel that make up the structure of the atrium, and feels the Force pulsating within every atom.
Ganner inhales deeply, sending through the Jedi meld his last thoughts and feelings, his hopes and dreams.
The warriors began to advance cautiously behind their acid-spewing tank beast. Thousands to replace the thousands he had slain.
Ganner grips the support beams and pillars all around them with the Force. He opens his eyes and gives the warriors all a cocky grin. Before the Force could completely take him, he puts everything he has into one final hand gesture.
A split second later, the entire room, and the floor above it, collapses down onto them all.
By then, however, Ganner had already become one with the Force.
[o-o-[VI]-o-o]
They were tired, sweaty, bloodied, and covered in blood, and Ganner's death, and his thoughts prior to it, were felt sharply by all those in the meld. Jaina's jaw tightened as she cut down one more warrior. Tahiri, her face a mask of pain, used her Vongsense-enhanced Force abilities to literally send several warriors flying into their companions. Jacen felt an invisible hand clench his stomach, while Anakin's own lightsaber form faltered for a few seconds.
They were nearing the citadel entrance, its garrison of warriors and shapers already emptied and engaged in the pitch fighting all around.

Warriors and Galactic Alliance soldiers clashed up and down the Imperial Palace Plaza, vibroblades, blasters, amphistaffs, razor bugs. Combatants on both sides were falling, but the din of battle didn't decrease in the slightest. Yells, screams, shouts of pain. The ground was covered with blood, bodies, and fallen weapons. The defenders were not inclined in the slightest to yield, and the attackers had everything on the line and wouldn't abandon their assault.
"No more," Jaina called out, meeting the eyes of her twin.
"No more," Jacen agreed.
Zekk and Tenel Ka, with Tesar, Lowbacca, Tekli, Bazel and Jysella in tow, fought their way to the twins and Anakin. The battle still in full swing, but the Jedi somehow managed to find an isolated pocket amidst a small phalanx of allied soldiers.
"Go!" Zekk gestured towards the Imperial Palace. "Go get Shimrra! We'll clear the way."
The other Knights gathered into a V-formation in front of the Solos, sabers lowered towards the Yuuzhan Vong.
"You sure you'll be fine with this mess?" Jaina asked wiping sweat from her dirt-caked forehead.
"[Go, end the war,]" Lowbacca rowled over his shoulder. "[We'll be fine.]"
With Zekk and Lowbacca leading the charge, the Jedi Knights in the front drew on their reserves and pushed against the Yuuzhan Vong defenders once more. Multiple colored blades flared and flashed, slicing and weaving through the air in motions too fast for the unassisted eye to follow. Bodies fell. The Jedi surged ahead.
The surge bent the defending line, and then finally broke through, a hole opening up for the slightest of moments. Taking advantage, Jaina, Jacen, Anakin, Tahiri, and Tenel Ka raced ahead without stopping once. The moment they passed, the brief gap was closed by a furious rush of weapons and bodies, pressing back and forth against one and other in a ceaseless flurry of action and death.
The five, however, continued on. They sprinted through the burnt out remains of the Imperial Palace doors, and disappeared into the darkened depths of Shimrra's Citadel.
Once inside the building, they slowed their pace, cautiously using their senses to look for any last trick Shimrra might have had in store. Their footsteps echoed loudly in the near-vacant building. The damage done to the once iconic example of Imperial power was clear even from the inside. Plasma bombardments had blown starfighter-sized holes in the ceilings and walls. Twisted bundles of wire and broken pipes stuck out from everywhere, with abandoned furniture and computers

covered in soot and ash. Half-way up, the durasteel and duracrete building gave way to the yorik coral and organic masses that made up Shimrra's sanctuary. The place where he commanded his forces and brought death and chaos to the galaxy.
And then a voice, mocking and in sing-song, joined the lonely sounds of their footfalls
"Come, come, Gods and Jeedai! There is no one else here but Shimmra and I! The god-slayers we are, oh yes indeed. Your deaths will be the motivation the Yuuzhan Vong need. Every step takes you closer to your fate. Come, come now, the hour is late. We challenge you, Yun-Harla, Yun-Yammka, Yun-Ne'shel, and all. We challenge you, and the galaxy will watch as you fall. When you are dead and your bodies begin to rot, we will then destroy the home of the 'gods' that lovely Zonama Sekot. So come to die, dear Jeedai. The end may be nigh, but this war is not over yet."
[o-o-[Chapter End]-o-o]
A\N: Story will end on Friday...Epilogue on Saturday. Thanks again for all of your support.

ADA 68

Sixty-Eight
[o-o-[I]-o-o]
The ascent to the very top of the citadel was slow, full of tension and heart-pounding adrenaline. The Force was guiding them, bringing them ever closer to the final fight. From above, Onimi continued his haunting sing-song, his deranged laughter echoing off the discordant corners of the yorik coral and duracrete structure.
"Come! Come to your deaths, at the hands of a vector most prime! You cannot escape the onslaught, the ruin! Woe is the day a hero is put on trial and found wanting. The day when the Yuuzhan Vong eclipse the Jedi. When mere mortals eclipse gods! A balance point? A tipping point with no recovery. You witness the conquest of your galaxy, the rebirth of the Yuuzhan Vong. Star by star, your systems have fallen, have taken the dark journey to the nether world. You dream of peace, you make your stand, but there are traitors everywhere. It is an endless dream, a nightmare, your destiny's way. From Sernpidal to Ithor. From Coruscant to Borleias. Nal Hutta to Ylesia. Bodies of your friends, your families lie, still and cold. You are but a remnant of your former selves, no more our equal, but every much our opposite. Refugees fleeing across the stars. And now we meet once more, a reunion long in the making. This is the final battle, so allow me, to make one final

prophecy. The galaxy forever shattered it will be, without a unifying force to pull it together, so you see, this war was more than necessary. Only I have the power, the might, to throw down gods, to make things right. For I am Onimi, gleeful me. Come and join me, in eternity!"

An organic lift brought the five Jedi Knights to the very roof top of the citadel, a final membrane door sliding away. The cloud bank and storm summoned by Shimrra was kilometers below them, a dazzling array of stars and epic space battle blazing away above. The air was cool and brisk, the atmosphere thin, and the ground slick with moisture.

Waiting for them on the roof was their primary target, the instigator of the war.

"Welcome, *Jeedai,*" Shimrra said coolly. At his side was his misshapen Shamed One, still cackling madly. The twelve Slayers that stood by were dwarfed by Shimrra's much larger, muscular form. "You have come to me at last."

"Shimrra," Jaina said curtly. "As a Jedi, I'm obligated to offer you one final chance to surrender."

Shimrra's rainbow eyes flashed red with anger, but his voice remained level. "And as your galaxy's ruler, this is *your* chance to submit to me, to renounce the lies you and your fellow *Jeedai* spout that have divided my people."

"This war is over," Jacen reinforced. "You've lost, Shimrra. You cannot hope to beat an entire galaxy if even your own people are rebelling against you."

"Jacen," Tahiri said suddenly, her chlorine-green eyes focused on Onimi's maddened figure.

"Tahiri?"

"Onimi," Tahiri said softly. "He can use the Force."

The others focused their gaze on the Shamed One, who seemed to recoil and shiver in fear. A split second later, however, a broad grin appeared on the Shamed One's lopsided face, eyes brightening as he leaped from Shimrra's side and landed directly in front of Jaina. With a happy cry, he held out both hands, and a blast of Force energy caught the five Jedi off guard.

All of them were swept off their feet, tumbling across the yorik coral roof and nearly hurled off the edge. They managed to recover, still in shock at what had just occurred.

"Speak honestly, Jaina Solo," Onimi crowd, his voice seemingly echoing in the heavens. There was none of the rhyming sing-song present in his voice as he brought himself up from his customary stoop and to his full height, rivaling nearly Shimrra in size. "Are you a god?"

Jaina, very slowly picking herself off the ground, glared at the Shamed One. "And if I said no?"
"Then you will die, of course. Die a slow and painful death as you watch me sweep the skies of your ships, of Zonama Sekot. Because unlike you, I am a true god. *I* wield their power. *I* see their will. No other Yuuzhan Vong or being in this galaxy has even the slightest chance of victory."
"And if I said yes?" Jaina unclipped her lightsaber and activated it. The purple blade glowed brightly, like a beacon, in the darkened sky.
Onimi held out both his hands and lightsabers from nearby Slayers flew into each. "Then it will be a fight among the divine, god versus god. My powers will be tested against your own, my will against yours. You shall still die, of course, but your death will only be a testament to my power. My unlimited power."
Face streaked with ash and grime from the fighting she had already been through, Jaina smirked faintly as her friends stepped up beside her. "We'll see about that."
"You're willing to take all of us on?" Tahiri said, her amphistaff snapping to attention in one hand, and her mother's lightsaber activating in the other.
"You really are more deranged than you appear." Jacen's imposing figure was illuminated in green, his expression deathly serious as he held his saber in front of him.
Tenel Ka's own green blade doubled the pall, the Queen Mother's grey eyes glittering dangerously as she stood in her rancor-leather outfit. "You have caused much pain to all, your people and those of this galaxy."
Anakin's lambent saber's purple blade extended with an authoritative hiss. "It's time for this war to end, Onimi, one way, or another."
Onimi cackled maddeningly, not at all cowed by their unity. "You are correct, Jedi Solo. It is time."
The Shamed One leaped backwards and landed back at Shimrra's side. At the same time, the blades of the Slayers activated, twelve shafts of deadly purple seemingly merging with the glows of Jaina and Anakin's lightsabers. Uncaring of the behavior of his familiar, Shimrra likewise stepped forwards. A giant coufee was in one hand, and a baton of rank clasped in the other.
"Now Jedi," Onimi crackled, his head tilted back towards the skies. Below, thunder boomed ominously. "Die!"
The hum of lightsabers, like hives of angry bees, hissed and buzzed on the rooftop of the citadel. Both sides sprinted towards the other and

met in a ferocious clash of action. Sabers slid on sabers, on amphistaffs, feet sliding across the slick ground of the roof.
Shimrra had obviously been saving the best of his Slayers for the last, as all twelve of the genetically-modified soldiers worked together like a well-oiled machine. They blocked, switched opponents, attacked, and whirled about all in perfect synchrony with each other. The air sizzled and crackled with every impact. Shouts of anger and defiance ringing out as neither side gave ground.
Every motion was faster than a normal eye could perceive. Every sweep of a blade and twirl going beyond the limits of mere mortals and boarding on the divine. They were mere blurs, dancing amongst each other. Flashes of shadow and light.
Slashing.
Cutting.
Thrusting.
Elbows.
Kicks.
It was nearly an even fight.
Nearly.
The five Jedi had grown up together, knew each other's moves down to their breathing rhythms and footwork. They had shared untold adventures together, the good times and the bad. Their shared memories resonated in the unique bond they shared, the love for one and other motivating them in ways mere duty could not.
Tahiri whirled around, landing a spinning kick onto the chest of a Slayer. The Slayer stumbled backwards and onto Jacen's saber, who pulled his blade free to cut down a second Slayer with a single stroke. Jaina and Tenel Ka were back to back, blocking each lash of purple with skill and teamwork built up from their childhood days. Without a word, they promptly changed opponents, lunging backwards with their sabers and catching the Slayers off guard. Two more Slayers fell, their lives ended by a goddess and a queen.
Anakin and Tahiri teamed up to take on a trio of Slayers. Jaina and Jacen working with Tenel Ka to take on another group. Lightsabers spun and buzzed, dancing in a flourishing, lethal display that stood out against the darkness of the citadel rooftop. The young Jedi switched off once more, the bodies of Slayers littering the ground around them.
And that was when the leader of the Yuuzhan Vong entered the fight. Shimrra's large form was impossible to miss as he charged into the fray like a raging bull. Tenel Ka, who had just dispatched a third Slayer with lethal efficiency, turned only to be tackled hard by the Supreme Overlord's giant form. His shoulder hit her mid-chest on the side of her

missing arm, breaking ribs, collapsing one of her lungs, and driving the wind from her. He then slammed a heavy foot into her stomach, the force of the impact sent her sprawling across the roof like a rag-doll, gasping in pain. Her lightsaber clattered away, and the Hapan queen clutched at her chest, struggling to draw in a breath. The Supreme Overlord moved to finish off the downed Jedi, only to have Jaina slide in between, her brown eyes hardened with anger.
"Supreme One," Jaina said mockingly.
"Jaina Solo," Shimrra smirked. His smile disappeared as he let out a roar of rage, bringing down his massive coufee towards the petite brunette with staggering strength. The entire roof seemed to shake with the violent clash, sparks flying free from Jaina's lightsaber.
Even though Jaina had managed to block the blow, the attack coursed through her entire body and temporarily drained the strength from her arms. She rolled out of the way as the coufee was swung about again, the blade tearing a massive gouge in the yorik coral floor.
Tahiri leaped in from behind, but Shimrra whirled back around and his tsaisi spat out a glob of scalding poison. Tahiri just barely avoided it with a boost of Force energy that changed her trajectory. Jaina took the opportunity to lunge forward, but again Shimrra appeared to have eyes in the back of his head as he brought his coufee around the parry the attack. He reached out, gripped Jaina's wrist, then hurled her into Tahiri; sending the two sliding across the roof in a pile of sprawled limbs.
In the meantime, the last Slayer fell as both Anakin and Jacen's blade scissored his head off in a joint attack. As the body hit the ground, both Solo brothers felt a brief warning in the Force, and leaped back as Onimi flipped through the air and landed between the two of them in a whirlwind of purple yorik-coral saber blades.
"Yun-Yammka and Yun-Ne'shel it is," Onimi laughed. "The first of the gods that will fall before me!"
Faster than either Solo expected; the deranged leader of the Yuuzhan Vong flipped back and forth between the two of them with lightning-quick strikes of his saber. Anakin was dropped to one knee as one of Onimi's blades lanced through his thigh. Jacen was staggered when another of Onimi's attacked bored through his side, just missing his stomach. Like an acrobat, Onimi kept up his bouncing attacks, kicking off the ground, the sides of the roof, the bodies of the Slayers. His lightsabers were a constant buzz, flaring for microseconds as they came in brief contact with the sabers of Jacen and Anakin.
A Force blow to Anakin's injured leg snapped the bone and caused the youngest Solo to fall to one knee, gasping in agony as stars exploded

in his vision. A blast of Force energy sent him tumbling backwards in an undignified roll. Jacen moved to help his brother, only to find Onimi sliding behind him. With a backwards jerk of his own saber, Jacen avoided being impaled, and then spun about to face the Force-sensitive Yuuzhan Vong.
"You're good," Jacen panted.
"I should be," Onimi grinned, his yellow teeth showing. "I'm a god."
Jacen replied by calling on the Force and using it to send a concentrated blast of wind directly into Onimi's face. The Shamed One let out a squawk of surprise as he was knocked to the ground. Jacen's saber missed the Yuuzhan Vong by millimeters as Onimi scampered away at the last minute. Searching for Onimi, Jacen saw the Yuuzhan Vong standing on a mound of yorik coral, arms thrown out like he was trying to embrace the sky.
"I *am* a god!" The entire building was suddenly seized with a powerful tremor. So violent was the quake that parts of the building broke off and disappeared through the bank of thunderclouds. It was as if Onimi was going to take the building, and everyone else on it, down with him.
Unfazed by the imminent destruction of the building, Shimrra stalked toward the two female Jedi with bloodlust in his eyes. Both Tahiri and Jaina kipped up, launching themselves into a series of acrobatic flips to counter the brute strength of the giant Yuuzhan Vong they were facing. His coufee and tsaisi continued to slice and slash through the air, but they nimbly floated around the weapons rather than try to block it.
At an unspoken signal, both young women abandoned their evasion and lashed out with their lightsaber in a simultaneous attack. But Shimrra's lightning fast reflexes kicked in again as his coufee batted aside Tahiri's lightsaber, while his tsaisi intercepted Jaina's blade. There was a brief pause as they all exchanged glances before both Tahiri and Jaina spun away in a flurry of robes and motion. The attack was quickly resumed, fast pace strikes cutting through the air and leaving no room for error for either party. Tahiri attacked with both lightsaber and amphistaff, locking both of Shimrra's weapons with her own. Jaina charged once more, thrusting her lightsaber forward. Shimrra outmuscled Tahiri, forcing all four of their weapons into the path of Jaina's weapon, and then broke the lock and sent Tahiri staggering backwards. A massive, clawed foot straight into Tahiri's face sent the blond flying across the roof and up against the lip. She tried to get back up, but swayed, and then collapsed next to Tenel Ka's own crumpled form.
Anakin hissed, feeling Tahiri lose consciousness from the blow. He turned his attention back to Jacen's and his opponent. Seeing Onimi

slam his brother with another ball of Force energy, Anakin's eyes narrowed. If Onimi could use the Force, he could also be affected by the Force. Anakin slowly pushed himself off the ground like an avenging wraith. The Force gathered around him, the light and the dark.

Onimi, sensing the buildup, whirled back around to the younger Solo. Anakin continued to steady his breathing, the Force coalescing around him in a torrent of energy and power. He began to glow, his eyes shining with energy.

Onimi just cackled, a black and green aura appearing as he too delved into the powers he had come into. Both held out their hands, and a barrage of sheer Force powers buffeted against one and other.

Jaina felt the wind shift, felt her little brother grow stronger in the Force, and that connection helped her calm herself once more. She focused on Shimrra, using the Force to renew her own strength. The Supreme Overlord tilted his head patronizingly, gesturing for her to launch her attack. Gripping her lightsaber with both hands, Jaina obliged. Moving even faster than before, her first few strikes bounced off of Shimrra's coufee and tsaisi. Her next few, however, sliced off half of the fingers of one hand, and scored a cut in the Supreme Overlord's muscular leg. Shimrra grunted, but didn't relent.

The massive Yuuzhan Vong simply pressed his attack, his arms like windmills as his tsaisi and coufee bit at Jaina from every angle. Cuts appeared on Jaina's face, arms, and side, but the brown-haired Jedi warrior was equally unfazed. A staggering blow from his coufee sent her sliding backwards, but she recovered and spring-boarded herself back towards the Supreme Overlord without a moment's delay. Her next sweep sliced off the coufee-holding arm and scored Shimrra's vonduun crab armor with a black streak. He backhanded her in response, but she bled off the damage using the Force.

She wasn't aware of it, but as she immersed herself into the Force, into the fight, she began to glow much like her brother. The Force was her armor, her weapons, an extension of her lightsaber blade. There was no dark or light, only action and reaction. Life and death. The Force flowed around her in a river of energy that allowed her absorb punishing blow after blow from Shimrra's increasingly wild attacks. Even as the building continued to shake in violent outbursts, she maintained her footing and met every single blow for blow.

Sweat poured down her forehead, the muscles of her arms and legs were sore and aching from the demanding fight of her life, but still she didn't relent in the slightest.

Finally Jaina saw the opening she needed and lunged for one last time. Her lightsaber jammed a weakened segment of vonduun crab armor and burned right through it and into Shimrra's torso. The Supreme Overlord stiffened, eyes growing round in disbelief. He reached out with his lone hand, grabbing both of Jaina's wrists once more; a feral snarl crossing his features. Before he could do anything else, however, there was a snap-hiss, and two lightsabers shot through the air like bullets.

The glowing blades each pierced the rainbow eyes of the Supreme Overlord and emerged out the back of his head. Turning her head, Jaina saw both Tenel Ka and Tahiri leaning against the side of the roof, each with a hand extended and a faint smile on their face. Shimrra's grip on Jaina lessened, and the Supreme Overlord toppled to the ground, very much dead.

With a laugh of relief, Jaina's own legs gave out, and she sat down, looking in the direction of her brothers.

The Force battle between Onimi and Anakin appeared to be equally matched, with neither gaining ground against the other.

"You cannot win," Onimi crackled, eyes yellow and mad. He began to advance on the injured Solo, his corrupted presence oppressing and massive.

Anakin winced, his hands faltering. Onimi was right, in his current state he didn't have a chance.

"Onimi," Jacen's voice broke through the deadlock as both Onimi and Anakin glanced at the older Solo.

"Yun-Yammka?"

"Get away from my brother," Jacen growled in a low voice, the Force exploding around him as he brought the full power of the Jedi Temple's nexus to bear. He had never had a reason to use the energies before, but now seemed as good a time as any. Powerful waves of Force energy rippled outwards, whipping clothing about and fluttering hair. The very air seemed to distort as Jacen began to follow in the examples of his siblings, embracing the Force to its fullest.

"Such power!" Onimi growled almost hungrily.

Jacen closed his eyes as the Force surrounded him, as he became one with the life-energies of the galaxy. He could feel the rooftop, the planet, the galaxy, in all its intricacies. He could see it now, the truth in Vergere's words. There was no dark side, there was no light side. There was only the Force. He could do what he wanted with it, without the limitations set by those who did not truly understand it. The Force was one. It was the intention of the user, the users own point of view, that made the Force appear separate.

Onimi's mad crackling, the ominous shaking of the building, the sounds of distant battle far below, Jacen took it all in as he opened his eyes. He was glowing now, a golden nimbus of Force energy as he advanced on Onimi. The Shamed One turned from Anakin to face the new threat. Like before, the Yuuzhan Vong reached out and to meet the impending barrage of Force energy.

Unlike before, Jacen was much more powerful. With a single hand, Jacen concentrated and imbued the Force with his will. He would return Onimi to his natural state, purify all the Shamed One's body of all its implants, its toxins, everything. The blast of Force energy that bombarded Onimi was nothing the Force-sensitive Yuuzhan Vong could hope to endure. With a shriek, Onimi's sickening green aura was drowned out, vanishing in Jacen's golden glow.

Jacen continued to step towards the Shamed One, not relenting in the slightest. Implants began to dissolve, blood began to boil. Onimi tried to counter by bringing his lightsabers back to bear, but a Force pull from Anakin yanked the weapons out of Onimi's hands. Frantic, the Shamed One tried to escape. The collection of toxins from the various implants continued to break down and released into his body.

Jacen pressed his attack, bombarding Onimi with wave after wave of cleansing Force energy, breaking Onimi's body down with every pulse. Onimi's legs gave out, and the Shamed One could do little but kneel as Jacen came to a stop before him.

"It's over," Jacen said softly, placing a hand on Onimi's forehead.

Onimi laughed weakly. "A true god of war."

"No, a Jedi."

Onimi emitted one last defiant shriek, before his entire body dissolved into a steaming mass of organic goo. The building immediately ceased its shaking, and the clouds below seemed to disappear as if blown by a heavy wind. Silence filled the rooftop as what had just occurred slowly sank in.

Jacen exhaled, letting the excess Force energy that had surrounded him escape back into the planet. It would definitely need all the help it could get. He then smiled tiredly at Anakin, who tilted his head weakly in turn.

"That was fun, Jace," Anakin breathed, lying down on the ground and trying to calm his still fast-beating heart. "Let's not do that ever again."

"Agreed," Jacen said. He walked over to his brother and spread himself out onto the ground next to him, staring in silent wonder at the vast array of stars above.

Jaina, Tahiri, and Tenel Ka joined the two, all of them using the bond they had to share the strength they had remaining and to rejoice over their success.
"We did it," Tahiri sighed, curling up against Anakin.
Tenel Ka, her hand gripping one of Jacen's tightly, sighed softly as his other gently began to heal the wounds she had sustained. "That, my dear friends, is a fact."
[o-o-[II]-o-o]
Natua Wan emerged from the center of the World Brain with Valin with a very heavy heart. The powerful, almost overbearing, presence of Ganner Rhysode was absent from the place in her soul that she had only begun to nurture. He had been her teacher, her guide, her friend. Had taught a socially awkward Falleen that it was okay to smile, to laugh, to have friends. That there was more to the Force, to being a Jedi, then what she had thought. The only solace she had was that Ganner had gone down on his own terms, rejoined the Force with a smile on his face.
"At least we were successful in convincing the World Brain to stand down," Valin said softly, trying his best to comfort her.
All around Coruscant, magma-spitters, voxyn, and all sorts of non-sentient creatures were standing down, ordered by the World Brain to cease their aggressions. The planet's weather was also returning to normal, the clouds scattering and releasing their moisture back into the sea. They had done it, but the cost had been one Jedi too many.
Realizing how low her mental barriers had become, Natua ashamedly raised them once more. "Sorry."
"Hey, don't be," Valin said, shifting. "I know he was like a master to you."
"In the few months that I knew him," Natua said with a small smile. Being Falleen meant that she was unable to shed any tears, but she was definitely crying on the inside as she recalled the very odd Jedi who was more than a hero in her eyes.
"He was insanely amazing," Valin said listlessly.
"He was," Natua nodded."
"Jedi!" One of the commandos they had left at the entrance of the Well of the World Brain waved at them.
"Is there a problem?" Valin said, he and Natua instantly falling into their professional masks once more.
"Just look," the commando gestured back towards the doorway.
Valin and Natua exchanged nervous glances, and Natua swallowed visibly. She wasn't sure if she was ready to see Ganner's body. Valin very gently slipped a hand into hers. "I'm with you."

Natua gripped the hand and nodded once. The two made their way over to the five commandos, and then froze at the sight. The destruction was awe-inspiring. Countless tons of debris had collapsed down onto thousands of Yuuzhan Vong. But what was even greater was that nearly half of the deaths bore a lightsaber wound and had clearly been killed before the atrium had been brought down.
"A Line of Rhysode," Natua said whimsically, spotting the line burned into the ground.
"He really didn't let a single one of them pass."
Almost as if the Force wanted them to find it, the pile of debris shifted, and two lightsabers rolled out of the heap and clattered to the floor. Both rolled to stop in front of Natua, her own lightsaber followed by Ganner's. It was as if Ganner was saying, 'Here's your lightsaber back, Green Girl.'
Natua bent down and picked both sabers up, holding them to her chest and closing her eyes in a silent display of mourning. She absently stretched her consciousness out into the Force, picking up the last remnants of Ganner's presence imbued in the very stone all around them.
"We couldn't have done it without you Ganner," Natua said softly. "Thank you, for everything."
Through the Force, they could feel Doran and the others grow closer, taking advantage of the sudden cessation of artillery and Fire Breather attacks to advance through stunned Yuuzhan Vong lines. Natua exhaled and clipped both lightsabers to her utility belt.
"Come on," Valin said softly. "Let's rejoin our friends.
Nodding once, Natua offered him one more, slight smile. "Yes, lets."
[o-o-[III]-o-o]
"Why do you not commit our forces?" Loiric Kaan raged from on the bridge of the *Yammka's Mount*. "We have the means to defeat them all! Why do you delay?"
"Supreme Commander, you can either silence yourself, or I will cut your tongue from your mouth," Nas Choka growled. "I do what I must to preserve as many Yuuzhan Vong as possible and…"
"We could be assaulting Zonama Sekot by now had you taken advantage of the infidel formation on the left wing! We could have massacred their fleets had you engaged the triangle vessels when we caught them out of position! What madness has gripped you, Warmaster?"
Nas Choka whipped out his amphistaff and clocked Loiric on the side of his head, knocking the Supreme Commander unconscious. The Warmaster stepped out from his chair and glowered at the man's

unconscious form. "Were all Yuuzhan Vong as short-sighted as you, we'd be in dire trouble indeed. Let us hope that your short-sightedness is not genetic. After you, your cousin is next in line. Subalterns, drag him back to his quarters."
"Yes, Warmaster."
With the Supreme Commander once again escorted from the bridge, Nas Choka glanced back at the blazebug niche and forced himself to relax once more. "Any message from the infidel fleets?"
"None yet, Warmaster. Do you expect their surrender?"
"Something similar, yes," Nas Choka said calmly. "Prepare the wing of Yun-Txiin to launch an all-out attack, but they are not to engage until I command them to."
"Yes, Warmaster."
"Warmaster."
Nas Choka turned to another subaltern. "Speak."
"The Supreme Commander has a point. In the past few hours we have yet to engage in any real battle with the infidel fleets. We allow their ground forces to spread out on the planet relatively unmolested, and we fight only skirmishes with their ships. What are we waiting for?"
"A sign," Nas Choka replied.
"From the gods?"
"Possibly," Nas Choka said, not wanting to reveal his doubts.
He would give the infidels one more hour to do what had to be done, but then he could wait no more. If Shimrra wasn't dead by then, the ground forces would most likely have failed. The trip back to Coruscant had been one of deep reflection for Nas Choka. He was one of the most important Yuuzhan Vong in their society, second only to the Supreme Overlord himself. Lives hung on his every word. And in a war where his will was already broken, that was a dangerous combination. Something had to change, and he had made his decision.
"Warmaster! Receiving incoming villip from the heretic leader!"
Nas Choka felt the tension in his shoulders. This was it. "I will permit her to address me."
"Warmaster Nas Choka, thank you for accepting my transmission. I am Supreme Leader Taan of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong. At this moment, we are all freed. Shimrra has been slain at the hands of Jaina Solo, Avatar of Yun-Harla. The World Brain is also under control of the Jedi and your creatures will no longer fight. Please have your ships and the forces on the ground stand down, no more Yuuzhan Vong need die today. Rather, I would be more than honored if you would join your forces with those of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong so our race will be one whole once more. There is no need to surrender, to submit to my authority or

take your own lives. That is not what our future should begin with. I offer an alliance, your strength added to my own so that we can take the Yuuzhan Vong into a future where violence and needless death is no longer an acceptable norm. The choice is up to you."

Nas Choka sat back in his polyp throne, his heart beating easier at the news and the pressures on his shoulders lifting. Though the rest of the bridge crew seemed aghast and in denial by the news of Shimrra's death, it was something Nas Choka believed inevitable the moment he witness the living planet with his own eyes. He knew it in his heart the moment he bore witness to Zonama Sekot. It was their home. The need to fight was over. He also understood then, why Shimrra had pressed for an attack on Mon Calamari in less than optimal conditions. The Supreme Overlord had feared the planet, feared what it meant for his rule and for the Yuuzhan Vong people. Those revelations had been the deciding factor for Nas Choka when choosing to hold back his ships. He wasn't about to send his people to die, to fight for a home, the infidels and heretics were obviously willing to give and share with them.

He reached out and stroked the hailing villip.

"Supreme Leader, your terms are acceptable and your words wise. There has indeed been enough deaths today, and if you speak the truth of Shimrra's death, it is clear the gods have turned from him and that it would be foolish to continue his crusade. Allow me to relay the message to the rest of my forces, and send word to the distant fleets. I will then be willing to meet with you on the living planet to discuss further terms."

"The Yuuzhan Vong are truly fortunate to have you as their Warmaster."

"After today, I do not think such a position will be necessary," Nas Choka replied wryly. He deactivated the villip, then caressed another that would give him fleet-wide communications. "This is Warmaster Choka. Shimrra has fallen at the hands of the *Jeedai*. All out-of-system fleet elements, all garrisons, are to report to Coruscant. The war is over. I repeat, the war is over. The Supreme Leader of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong is offering us a place at their side, a home and a future that we might not have had before. If your loyalty to Shimrra demands it, I give you permission to take your own lives. But if you, like myself, believe that more can be accomplished while living, then lower your weapons and cease all combat activities. We still have the honor of the Yuuzhan Vong. This is not *our* loss, but Shimrra's. We surrender to no one, but instead are rejoining our brethren who were driven away by Shimrra's policies. All yorik-et are to return to their birth-ships. All

warriors to return to their barracks, and transports will be sent to collect you. After four long years of fighting, this war is finally over."

[o-o-[IV]-o-o]

The mood on Zonama Sekot was a mix of joy and somberness as shuttles returned from Coruscant to offload their battle-worn soldiers. Many who had gone out had not returned, many more had returned injured or permanently crippled. With the only medical center capable of handling the wounded on Zonama Sekot, transports from both sides of the war were constantly coming and going, disgorging a new batch of injured for the multi-racial team of healers to handle. Tekli and Cilghal were working with other medical personnel, and Nen Yim and Yuuzhan Vong shapers to handle the influx. With the war over, there were no 'sides' any more, just wounded and those there and ready to help.

The Solo children disembarked their own shuttle and were promptly swept up into hugs by Leia, Han, Luke, Mara, and Winter. Once Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin had had the stuffing hugged from them, Tahiri, a startled Tenel Ka, and an equally bemused Jag—who had come off a shuttle from the Chiss fleet under his command—were next. More hugs were exchanged when Lando and Tendra Calrissian joined the group, followed by other friends and family. Zekk, Lowbacca, and Tesar were promptly roped in as old friends just took pleasure in being able to talk to one and other once more.

When both Czalpak and Shaeri approached the group and saw the happy tears and hugs being given, they quickly took several steps backwards in fear. They could face down armies, fleets, packs of ravenous creatures, but Yuuzhan Vong did not 'hug' and they most certainly did not cry.

"Shaeri!" Tahiri beamed, a bacta patch slapped over the cut on her face created by Shimrra's talon; that was one scar she *wasn't* going to keep. "Oh, and Czalpak too! You made it through!"

"We did," Shaeri nodded, returning the smile. "And we are relieved that you did as well."

"I am too!" Zindra Daine called out, pushing her way through the crowd.

"Zindra!" Tahiri's eyes widened in shock at the sight of her bacta-wrapped wingman. "What are you doing here?"

"Broke out of the med-center, stole an X-wing, and made my way out here by myself," Zindra hugged the younger woman. "Wasn't going to let my squadron leader participate in the last battle without covering your six. I'm glad you made it out, Leader."

Tahiri just nodded, hugging the older pilot tightly.

"Ouch! Ouch!" Zindra hissed. "Still burnt to a crisp here!"
Other reunions took place as Yaqeel and Seff, part of the fleet group, energetically met up with Valin, Jysella, Natua, and Bazel. Kyp Durron reunited with Kadra Bres, Garm Bel Iblis's second in command, with a steamy kiss. A wry Scout was again shaking hands with Olee, the words 'we're getting too old for this' clear as they just smiled along with the rest of the group. Doran and Sannah were embraced by a bloodied and tired Tyria and Kell Tainer. And when Corran and Mirax came off their own ships, they promptly sandwiched their children in a hug that rivaled that of the Solo-Skywalker clan.
Drinks and food were set up by Talon Karrde and his people, and music was pumped through several portable speakers. An impromptu dance-floor was laid out, and people running high on the adrenaline of the win promptly filled it.
A makeshift bar proved to be immensely popular among the Mandalorians, who began singing with several other soldiers groups. It didn't even matter that they weren't singing the same song as shouts of *'Naasad'guur mhi!'* joined the myriad of other languages and words in an almost perfect chorus; drunken revelry was definitely a universal pastime.
In the meantime, members of Rogue Squadron were hoisted up onto the shoulders of the ground soldiers they had saved, cheered and worshiped by the countless men and women whose lives had been on the line. Even more important was when several Freed Yuuzhan Vong warriors were likewise hefted up into the air in a celebration of their own brave feats.
Laughter, sad smiles, and relieved sighs continued to fill the plains of Zonama Sekot as everyone present rejoiced in those living and mourned those who had passed on.
Troopships continued to land, and Yuuzhan Vong from both the Freed Yuuzhan Vong fleet, and those from Nas Choka began to disembark. Teams of Freed Yuuzhan Vong were already directing these new arrivals to yorik-coral houses constructed nearby, the basis for the first Yuuzhan Vong city. More warriors began to mingle with the soldiers they had been fighting alongside or against, the sides bonding over their shared experiences.
Anakin was just content to have an arm wrapped around his girlfriend and enjoy the festive surroundings when a squad of heavily armed Yuuzhan Vong warriors approached him. The crowd seemed to part, with nervous glances thrown in his direction. Then, surprisingly, the warriors reached him and knelt before him as one. The lead warrior clasped his fist to his chest and said gruffly. "Anakin Solo, redeemer of

Vua Rapuung, Avatar of Yun-Ne'Shel. Those of Domain Rapuung pledge themselves to you and your family. From this moment forward, we shall defend you and your own to our last breaths."
Anakin blinked dumbly, until Tahiri nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. "Oh….errr. I accept? I guess. Thanks?"
"You honor us. When you are ready, you have but to call and we will slay your enemies."
The warriors rose, clasped a fist against their chest in salute, and then departed.
Anakin blinked dimly once more and then looked down at his girlfriend. "What just happened?"
"I'm not sure," Tahiri shook her head. "Shaeri?"
"The leaders of Domain Rapuung were slain in the fighting for Coruscant," Shaeri provided. "Those eight you saw are all that remains of their Domain. As you might have noticed, apart from their temporary leader, none were over the age of sixteen. As an avatar of the gods, they are entrusting you with their lives and will look to you for guidance. It is a custom among smaller Domains to be absorbed for both protection and to ensure the continuation of their genetic line."
"And I thought having a single life-debt was something," Han whistled.
"Not helping, dad," Anakin hissed.
"Hey, your mom has the Noghri following her around. You get to have a Domain of warriors," Han said with a smile. "It's better than what Jacen got."
"Huh?"
"Teneniel gave him a baby rancor," Leia said, hooking an arm around her husband's and gesturing towards Jacen.
Jacen seemed quite content as he petted a rancor as big as he was, talking to it fondly and stroking it as if it were a fluffy rabbit.
Anakin and Tahiri stared in blank disbelief, and could see Tenel Ka watching Jacen with the fondest of expressions.
"The war is over and he goes back to being Jacen-with-the-crazy-pets-Solo," Tahiri giggled.
"Where exactly is he going to keep it?" Anakin wondered aloud.
"Tenel Ka said something about having a petting zoo of some sorts set up at the palace. Told him it would give him an incentive to visit, as he apparently shows more interest in a rancor, than her," Leia shared with a grin.
"Ouch," Anakin laughed, hearing his brother's cry of '*Mom!*' in the Force.
Jacen took that moment to shoot the group a glare. He then gave the rancor one last pat, walked over to Tenel Ka, cupped her face, and

gave her a kiss in front of everyone. Evidently he was going to prove that Tenel Ka did indeed rate higher than a baby rancor on his list of priorities.
"Oh," Tahiri said, hiding a smile with her hands.
"There goes the worst kept secret," Anakin agreed.
"What better way to announce a relationship than to do it in front of Teneniel, all of the Hapan Royal Guard, and a handful of Dathomiri," Jaina added with a grin, walking to Anakin and Tahiri with Jag beside her. The aforementioned groups were all glaring daggers at Jacen as he continued the very long and passionate kiss.
"Are they going to come up for air anytime soon?" Jag blinked.
"Hey, if Jacen is going to become the most hated of males in two star systems, and be an instant target for assassins, he might as well make the kiss worth it," Tahiri chirped.
Leia and Han just shook their heads in amusement, lacing their fingers together as Leia rested her back against Han's chest. The war was over. They had all their children, and most of their friends. They may have lost people they cared for, but compared to some, they were the lucky ones. As everyone just laughed and joked, the older couple shared a small private grin. Things were definitely looking up.
[o-o-[V]-o-o]
In a distant clearing on Zonama Sekot, a different sort of meeting was taking place. Cal Omas, Gilad Pellaeon, and several other galactic leaders stood behind Taan, Naazar, and other members of the Supreme Council, as a Yuuzhan Vong shuttle descended. The ramp opened, and Nas Choka emerged with a small retinue of subalterns in tow.
Taan inclined her head politely. "Warmaster."
"I no longer wear that title, Supreme Leader," Nas Choka said smoothly. "The war is over, so there is none to master. Similarly, there is no war, so there is no need for warriors. What will you have the hundreds of thousands do? Pick up trowel and rake and tend to plants?"
"Some, but not all," Taan shook her head slowly. "The Jedi and myself have managed to negotiate with the leaders of this galaxy for terms quite favorable considering what our peoples have done."
"Terms?" Nas Choka said suspiciously.
"We are allowed to keep enough ships to defend ourselves, so those ships can be fully staffed," Taan said firmly. "Other warriors may be allowed to stay on this planet to help keep the peace. Through the Jedi, the leaders of this galaxy have seen that the warrior decree is not something that can be so easily dismissed. The warriors will be allowed

to keep to their oaths, but at the same time, you and I and the other members of our leading council will work together to gradually phase out the more extreme aspects of that oath. We will also be given a voice, protection, and rights as a member of the Galactic Alliance, similar to what its other members states have. If we are ever attacked, the Jedi and their allies will come to our aid. This will limit the need for the armada we have now."
Nas Choka tilted his head. "That is…acceptable."
"The Jedi have also been creating programs for warriors who no longer wish to be warriors," Taan continued. "If they wish to settle down and take up the trowel and rake, then there will be those who can help them get started."
"And what of the tradition? We honor a tradition that cannot be altered," Nas Choka said, holding the eyes of the smaller female before him. "To be Yuuzhan Vong meant something at one time. Tradition was all that kept our people together during the travels in the void."
"And it will keep us together still," Naazar spoke up. "In our hearts, the gods still exist. In our minds, they guide us. For the longest time, though, their words were drowned out by Shimrra's lies. Twisted and manipulated by him to get us to do his bidding. You have heard the rumors, yes? That the very planet we stand on was a seed of the original Yuuzhan'tar?"
"I have," Nas Choka said with a nod. Though it had only been recently, the day he had been recalled from his campaign against Dac, the news still had yet to truly sink in. Even now, standing on the planet, it was hard to believe that after so many years of searching for a home, they finally return to the very world they had been cast from.
"In a way, Zonama Sekot incorporates all aspects of the Yun'o," Naazar said. "Yun-Yuuzhan, Yun-Harla, Yun-Ne'shel, Yun-Shuno…"
"Yun-Yammka?"
"Yes, even the god of war," Naazar said. "But it is a natural war, the cycle of life and death, of good and evil within the hearts of us all. Losing that battle within ourselves is what cast us into the void in the first place, but Zonama Sekot is a second chance. One not everyone is fortunate enough to receive."
"Our children?"
"They will be allowed to grow on Zonama Sekot, and in time, return to the stars," Naazar said.
"And the Shamed Ones?"
Taan managed a small smile. "You speak of the caste I was from, Nas Choka."

The former Warmaster's eyes bulged, showing something besides tacit acceptance since the conversation had begun. "You…a Shamed?"
"I prefer the term 'Freed One'," Taan smiled softly. "But yes. The only thing the Jedi changed about our society was the elimination of the slave or disgraced caste. On Zonama Sekot, shapers, indendants, priests, and even warriors will be allowed to continue on as they were. But they will also be allowed to be more than shapers or warriors if they wish. On Zonama Sekot, our society will be able to redefine itself, without the need to abandon completely its core beliefs."
Nas Choka's mouth moved several times, as he tried to get over the fact that he was now subordinate to a Shamed One. "You mentioned earlier that we are a part of this galaxy's governing system. I assume that it comes at a price?"
"Only that we are to repair the damage we inflicted on the many planets to the best of our abilities," Taan said. "Shapers will be dispatched to do their best to reverse the planet-shaping processes we initiated. Others still will work with the scientists of this galaxy to improve our biots and increase our own knowledge. Zonama Sekot will be leaving Coruscant's orbit soon to avoid retribution and exploitation and will head to the fringes of this galaxy so that the Yuuzhan Vong will remain as unmolested as possible."
"So just repair?"
Taan swallowed. "That, and we must persuade any of our people still in isolated systems to surrender and join us as well."
"That will be difficult. Many enjoy the systems they were granted under Shimrra," Nas Choka replied. "There are more systems than I have fingers that have fleet elements that did not answer my summons when we returned to this planet."
"They are our responsibility," Taan said solemnly. "We will do our best not to kill them after all the death, but…"
"We may not have a choice," Nas Choka said with a nod. He was well aware that there would be many like Loiric Kaan who knew only how to live by strength and violence.
"Yes," Taan said reluctantly. "You might have to be Warmaster for just a little while longer."
"And the leaders of this galaxy approve of this?" Nas Choka looked to the silent Cal Omas.
"We do," Cal Omas inclined his head. "Our fight was with Shimrra and his policies, not against your race as a whole. We will not punish many for the decisions of one, nor do we have the right to strip away your identity and destroy your culture. There will be no healing if we do. Rather, we hope to eventually work side-by-side with the Yuuzhan

Vong, as we have done today to topple Shimrra, to make this galaxy a better place for all. It may be a long time for this galaxy to heal, but I would like to start off that foundation with trust."
"Does that include leaving the dhuryam intact in the center of your galaxy?" Nas Choka said with some amusement.
Cal Omas laughed. "Consider it the foundation of an enduring partnership between your people and those of this galaxy."
[o-o-[VI]-o-o]
By having Nas Choka and the others 'surrender' not to the Galactic Alliance, but to the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, even the most die-hard of warriors began hoping for a new life on Zonama Sekot. They were allowed to save face, keep the honor and pride that they had been raised with, but at the same time, have a way out that didn't involve death or humiliating submission. Despite Taan and Nas Choka's fears that they would have to clear out systems of their more stubborn brethren using violent means, most of those fears proved unfounded. Often, all it took to get them to stand down was an invitation extended to the domain leader or fleet commander to visit Zonama Sekot and see for his or her own eyes just what laid in store for the Yuuzhan Vong race. A guarantee that their domain's safety and security was assured, a place where their children could actually grow up with the customs and traditions that their parents were used to. It was a long and laborious process, but both Taan and Nas Choka were determined to preserve as much of their race as possible.
In the meantime, three different settlements had developed on Zonama Sekot. The Ferroans and Galactic Alliance teams helped to settle the war-weary Yuuzhan Vong, and keep the order between rival domain groups who were just as frightened of the unknown future as they were about the living planet they now resided on.
The Yuuzhan Vong also began helping Zonama Sekot recover from the ill-fated initial contact nearly fifty years prior, learning about the planet and allowing the planet to learn more about them in the process. Progress was slow, but there were already signs that both planet and people would grow to form very strong bonds.
On Coruscant, teams of scientists and shapers were spread throughout the planet, rounding up and transporting the various Yuuzhan Vong plants and animals that had been imported up to Zonama Sekot. Another team worked closely with Jacen, Natua, and Valin, to enlist the World Brain's help in restoring the war-ruined world. Other teams worked to restore the more symbolic structures, such as the rest of the Senate Building and the Imperial Palace. It would take many, many

years before the planet was ready for habitation once more, but it was a start.
But with the end of the war also came more soul-searching for the Jedi. The war had united them in a way they had never been before, had given them purpose and a sense of just what it meant to be a Jedi. But the war was over, and the government no longer needed the Jedi as they were.
Battlemelds, the ability to sense Yuuzhan Vong, lightsabers, they were all symbols of an era when a warrior was needed. They couldn't restore the worlds decimated by the war, conjure up planets for the billions of refugees to settle, or undo the damage done to the victims of the slave-implants. As powerful as the Jedi were, predicting fleet movements, mind-tricks, and leading soldiers were no longer necessary. Though the Jedi were also skilled with diplomacy, the Galactic Alliance also had its own diplomatic corps to handle post-war treaties between the different governments. Rather than destruction, the galaxy wanted to rebuild. Rather than to hail war-heroes and honor the dead, the people of the galaxy wanted to look ahead.
Everywhere one looked, the times were moving on once again. And like any government, the Jedi needed to move along with the rest of the galaxy or once more be left behind.
And so a gathering of all the Jedi was called, from every corner of the galaxy and from every post. Apprentices to masters, Knights to wayward Force-users who came because they were curious about what the Order stood for.
T'ra Saa, and K'Kruhk, masters from the old Order appeared both excited and curious about what direction the Jedi were going to take now. Uldir Lochette, Leia Organa Solo and Danni Quee, who were only marginally affiliated with the Order, were also in attendance. As were countless others. Nearly seventy Jedi, the survivors of the war, were gathered about in the amphitheater on Sekot, patiently awaiting their next direction.
The Jedi of the High Council stepped forward and took center stage; Corran Horn, Jacen Solo, Tresina Lobi, Cilghal, Kenth Hamner, and Saba Sebatyne. Luke Skywalker and his wife remained in the back of the audience, balancing Ben between the two of them.
"Welcome, all of you," Kenth began. "Almost this time last year, we had gathered together, lost and conflicted. An Order nearly fractured by differing opinions and philosophical beliefs. With the help of a Jedi meld, we found our way again, regained our bearings. We developed a purpose for the Jedi, what the Jedi would be for the duration of a war we believed could go on for many, many years. We worked side-by-

side with each other, with the Galactic Alliance government to make the end a reality, and it was through our unity that we succeeded. But now, I know that many of you are asking 'what's next?' What's next for the Order?"

Corran Horn stepped forwards, hands clasped in front of him within his Jedi robes. "As the Jedi of the High Council, we thought long and hard about that. The war called for warriors, but the war is over. The Galactic Alliance is taking its first few post-war steps as a coalition, do we help with that? Running around the galaxy and putting out every little fire here and there? We are in a tricky situation, as our mandate as a Jedi Order requires us to safeguard peace and justice. But, our definition of peace and justice might not always match up to what the Galactic Alliance has in mind. When we signed up, we became one of dozens of member-states within the alliance. Our rules and mandate are our own, adopted only in spirit by the Yuuzhan Vong and no one else. What constitutes 'justice'? Should the Galactic Alliance run afoul of our own conception of it, does our mandate give us the right to transcend the jurisdiction of the central government? Those were some of the questions we ran into when trying to think about the future for the Order."

"The interesting thing about *this* configuration of Jedi is that we all differ in philosophies and methods, yet somehow we manage to work together and get things done," Jacen remarked lightly. "In addition to the legal and directional questions we as a council talked about, we also debated the Force philosophy we wanted to adopt. As an Order, having a dozen different views of the Force is good and bad. Good in that we avoid becoming predictable, we come up with unique solutions that a single philosophy might never have considered. Bad in that we remain separate on a fundamental level, prone to fracturing and using our unique beliefs to justify our actions. Yet, we as a council don't want to stifle independent thought, discourage alternative ways of thinking. It was why we agreed that a singular view, in its most basic form, would be enough to establish some sort of guideline for future Jedi."

"After some arguing about the finer points," Cilghal said gently. "We would like to share with you our interpretation of the Force as we see it, and implore all of you to use it as a guideline when considering your own philosophies. The Force philosophy we adopted, as we will define it now, is one that describes the Force as an all-compassing power where light and dark are not separate, but intertwined. Each of us has the potential to do both good and evil, but it is the intent of our actions, the degree in which we use our emotions to control our actions, that ultimately decides what is light and what is dark. Anger is

not necessarily dark unless combined with a will to hurt, to dominate. Pacifism is not necessarily light if we stand by and let another get harmed through our own inaction."
Tresina was next. "Using this philosophy, we must be aware of our emotions more than ever, more in touch with ourselves so that we will recognize when we are being led not by our minds, but by our hearts. Within ourselves, is a darkness that even the best of us carry and are vulnerable to. What we must do is not master that darkness, but come to know it, to acknowledge it and to accept it as a part of who we are. The Jedi cannot solely thrive on the light side, just as the dark side needs the light to exist. The best we can do is prepare ourselves and hope that when the time comes, you'll be able to call upon all of your experiences, the aid of your fellow Jedi, and resist any darkness that might want to take this galaxy. Now this is just a guideline, and since Orders in the past haven't really operated like this, we're not sure how well it will work. In any case, please do your best to stick to it so that we will at least have some semblance of uniformity and unity."
"So, now that that's done with," Kyp said, smiling at the crowd. "I'm here to tell you all what us six wise Knights and Masters have decided on with regards to the future of this order. To put it simply, all we want you to do is think deeply on how you can best serve the galaxy, serve the Force. And when you've come up with that idea, run it by us. Chances are, unless your plan is to become the next Sith Lord, or declare yourself royalty—Tenel Ka, Galfridians, you're excused—we'll okay it. If you don't have a plan, or need some direction, we've already got several ideas of our own that could use some volunteers.
As food for thought, a couple of you have already indicated that you'll stay on with the fleet. A few more are going to help out the refugee situation and keep the usual con-men and crime bosses away from them. Kam and Tionne are going to go to the new Jedi Academy we've founded on Ossus. And at the same time, Jedi Knight Saba Sebatyne and Master Ramis will be restarting the academy on Yavin Four. This is kind of in line with what we were talking about with fostering different lines of thought. As diverse as we are, it'd be a waste to devote the entire order to one goal. We're not the galaxy's policemen, baby-sitters, or wet-nurse. What we're going to do is do what we've always done. Let each of you do what you do best, and trust all of you to make this galaxy better. If you want to spend your days in meditation, go right ahead, just remember to share any pearls of wisdom with the rest of us less restful Jedi."
"Remember," Saba hissed softly. "That the Force doez not flow *from* uz, but through uz, alwayz on the move. True power iz measured not

by how strong one iz in the Force, or the featz one can perform, but by the ability to resist temptation, to sacrifice one'z self for those who have less, and to alwayz be aware of your fellow Jedi and their own sufferingz. We are people just like any other, and so long az you are a part of thiz Order, you will never be alone."
Jacen stepped up for the end-note, tilting his head towards the audience. "The Force binds us together with every living thing in this galaxy, and we'll serve it however it wants us to. Like the damaged galaxy, our Order will need generations to truly define itself, but it always starts somewhere. We're going to be the foundation for an Order the likes this galaxy has never seen before. A family that will back each other up, will risk life and limb protecting this galaxy and all the people we care for. There is one thing that is clear, no matter what the future has in store for us, however, and that is we are a different breed of Jedi than generations past. We are truly the New Jedi Order."
[o-o-[VII]-o-o]
Several days later, a group of young Jedi lay sprawled out on a grassy knoll, a sense of calm and peace permeating the night air. It was Zonama Sekot's last day in orbit above Coruscant before it would disappear and seek out a place of its own.
"We've been through a lot, haven't we?" Zekk sighed softly.
"Yeah," Jaina said, her hands gripping that of her twin and her younger brother.
"And to think some of us aren't even twenty yet," Valin added.
"Or fourteen," Jysella chirped.
"It's strange. With the war over we all should be able to stay together and finally enjoy life," Jacen said contemplatively. "Instead we're all going our different ways."
"It's not like we can't keep in touch," Bazel said. "Just because Valin and Sella are returning to Corellia to help them out, and Natua and Seff are going on to Ossus to help with the new Jedi academy that's being built doesn't mean I can't contact them."
"[It's not the same though]," Lowbacca said, his head resting on the palms of his furry hands.
"Definitely not the same," Tenel Ka agreed, her head resting in the crook of Jacen's arm.
"You never said what you were going to do, Lowie," Jaina looked to her Wookie friend. "Are you returning to Kashyyyk?
"[I'm helping my cousin take on his father's life-debt to your father]," Lowbacca answered. "[Only the Force can say where your dad will take us.]"
"Good luck," Jacen said glibly. "You'll need it."

Lowbacca emitted a grumbling laughter.
"How about you, my friend Tesar?" Tenel Ka looked to the Barabel Knight.
"Thiz one will be taking over the Wild Knightz in place of my mother. We will be patrolling the trade routez to ensure badly damaged economies can recover," Tesar replied, his tail flicking lazily. "Thiz one will definitely miss hiz friendz."
"Yeah, we'll miss you too, buddy," Jaina sighed. "And you, Zekk?"
"Bazel and I will be going wherever the Jedi need us," Zekk shrugged. "Like most Jedi I guess."
"It seems so unreal, doesn't it?" Seff Hellin whispered. "Like everything that's happened these past few years has happened to another version of you. We've spent our childhoods fighting a war, grown up with war occurring all around us. This peace…it just feels…weird."
"I know what you mean," Jaina sighed. "You fight and fight and fight for peace, but when you finally have it, what do you do next? Fight to protect it? I'm a sword, a symbol of the warrior spirit of the Jedi. I guess like the Yuuzhan Vong warriors, I'm going to have to find some way to redefine myself."
"Like going to Chiss Space," Zekk chuckled. "I heard you talking with Master Skywalker. Are you really going to become the Jedi Ambassador to the Ascendancy?"
"Someone has to keep an eye out on the Vagaari and Ssi-ruuk and whatever else might be lurking in those dark corners of space," Jaina said airily.
"I doubt that's all you'll be keeping your eyes on," Jacen said dryly.
"Says the mystic about to embark on a four year journey of discovery," Jaina rolled her eyes. "You're really going to wander around the galaxy looking for hidden enclaves of Force-users?"
"Yup," Jacen nodded. "With the war over, I figured I better learn how to pull my weight on the council. Vongsense is not really going to be of any help anymore, so the more points of view I learn, the better."
"I hope you find what you are looking for," Natua said.
"Thanks," Jacen nodded at the Falleen.
"You've been quiet, Anakin, Tahiri, Is there something wrong?" Tenel Ka looked at the young couple several bodies over.
"Not really," Anakin answered evasively.
"You're hiding something," Jaina raised an eyebrow. "Tahiri is too."
"No we're not," Tahiri said a bit too quickly. Shyness and embarrassment irradiated from the young couple as they squirmed under the eyes of their friends.

The group all looked at each other, a brief Jedi meld bringing up and dismissing likely possibilities.
"He proposed." Zekk guessed.
"Probably," Tesar's head bobbed in agreement.
"Most likely," Tenel Ka concurred.
Jaina scrutinized a rapidly reddening Tahiri and Anakin and declared. "Most definitely."
"Blast it! Why does everyone we have to know be Jedi!" Anakin said with a laugh, smiling broadly.
Tahiri beamed as she revealed a two-gemstone ring that glittered like the suns of Tatooine.
Joyous laughter filled the hillside as congratulations and well-wishes were shared by the group of young people. Despite the hardships they had all gone through, the pain they had shared and overcome, they were stronger for it. Their bonds, forged in an intergalactic war, were unbreakable. The strength of their friendship overwhelming.
While Zekk and Jacen patted Anakin on the back in congratulations, Jysella, Jaina, and Tenel Ka shared hugs with a blissfully happy Tahiri. Valin and Seff added their good-wishes, smiling at their heroes and role-models, grateful that some happiness could emerge so soon after the devastating war. Jokes were shared and laughter rang out once more as tears of happiness and delight radiated outwards from the young heroes. They were more than friends, more than comrades in arms, they were family.
There was happiness and hope in the galaxy, a sense that everything could be fixed, that everything would turn out for the better. The sounds of celebration and merriment echoed from the hillside, floating out across the planet where Yuuzhan Vong were hard at work building new lives, up into the boughs highest reaches of the bora where creatures were adjusting to the influx of animals brought in by the planet's new inhabitants, and stretching out into the glittering field of stars—too numerous to count—traveling across space and time as if destined to be heard in every corner of the galaxy.
All made possible by a single kiss, a destiny altered, on a distant planet, in a galaxy far, far, away.
[o-o-[Story End!]-o-o]
A\N: Wow...I'm donem I'm actually done with this story...wow. Thanks to everyone whose read, reviewed, or commented on the forum, your support and comments never cease to bring a smile to my face =). I'll have more to say at the end of the epilogue, but now would be another good time to leave a review and let me know your final thoughts about this story.

Yipeeeeeeee, it's done! *does a backflip of joy*

ADA 69 Epilogue

Epilogue
[o-o-[I]-o-o]
Swirling, tumbling, in the mysterious part of space called the Unknown Regions, an asteroid the size of a small planet danced through the stars. Within was a frantic scene of activity, millions upon millions of creatures scampering to and fro. Insectoid clicks echoed through the rock, compound eyes viewing the stars on a spectrum unseen by other species. Ships, unlike any the galaxy had seen before, escorted this spinning rock, filled with millions more of the insect-like creatures. They all worked for a single purpose, a goal.
"Too light! It is too bright!" Hissed a scarred and wide-eyed individual, holding up his misshapen hands as if being blinded. He had been human once, a blond user of the Force that had once answered to the name of Welk. But he was Welk no longer. He was a part of the Colony, and they a part of him. As he stared off into the distant stars, he continued to hiss and hold up his hands. "It must be brought to darkness or calamity will occur once more."
"Must it?" Another voice asked, bug-like limbs emerging from his back. What was left of Jedi Apprentice Raynar Thul no longer responded to that name. He served a greater purpose now, his thoughts and decisions affecting millions of lives. "We no longer care for light and dark. We care for our own."
"But the Nest-mind remembers, don't we?" A third, female, voice whispered, the Force surrounding her in corruptive waves. Lomi Plo had once been her name, a Nightsister from Dathomir. But like Welk, like Raynar, she was Lomi Plo no longer. She was simply another part of the Colony, her thoughts and feelings their own."We remember the last time the darkness rose to snuff out the light. Too dark the galaxy was, even for the Colony. The light must be extinguished before it becomes too strong."
"We would return to the galaxy then," Not-Welk sounded excited at the prospect. "Return, grow, spread. The colony will thrive, just like you wished, Prime Unu."

"Yes, a return would be good," the second voice agreed. "The colony must grow, bring balance to the Force."
"And a galaxy that is too bright must be brought back into darkness. Chaos must be sown, cries of sorrow ring out across the stars. Spark a disaster to avoid a greater terror. A thimble of darkness to balance out the light."
"We must not hurt others though."
"It cannot be avoided. Hurt now or a certain death later. Small wars to avoid the big war. We are merciful."
"When they join us, Prime Unu, they will understand. We do this for the betterment of the galaxy."
"A darkness now or eternal darkness later," Not-Welk said cheerfully, mirroring his previous comment.
"We must do this, mustn't we?" The second voice said reluctantly, eyes staring at distant stars. "We must destroy what is being built."
"For the good of the Colony, UnuThul," Not-Lomi whispered into his ear, her hand over his heart. "For the good of the Colony, for the good of the galaxy. The non-Joiners cannot know what we do, why we do what has to be done. We bring them knowledge."
"There is no ignorance, there is knowledge."
"Yes, and there is the Force," she agreed amiably. "There is no death. What we lay out is a comforting blanket so that *she* may continue to sleep. So that her silver eyes stay closed and her loneliness assuaged. For in her dreams she has a family, a home, a place. We do not wish to deprive her of that."
"Already the timelines have been altered, a destiny averted," the voice of UnuThul seemed to reason with himself. "A sign of the end. An end is not good for the Colony."
"No, so what must we do?" Not-Welk asked, as if forgetting the entire conversation already. Thousands of creatures chattered in distress around them. "What must we do for the Colony?
"We will return to the galaxy and keep *her* from awakening," UnuThul proclaimed.
"We will spread darkness to temper the light," Not-Lomi added in confirmation.
"We will destroy the Jedi before they destroy the galaxy," Not-Welk said in barking laughter.
"And we will do this not because we wish it, but because it is necessary," UnuThul concluded. "To avoid an eternal night, the galaxy must burn. The light must be quenched before its brilliance reaches the silver eyes of *her*."
"Eons we have watched over the galaxy, awaiting this moment."

"No longer will we have to wait, for the end draws nigh."
"Let us return to the galaxy now. Let them once more say our names, let them know the will of the Colony, of the Prime Unu."
"Yes," Not-Lomi said, eyes swirling with madness. "Let the galaxy once more know the name of Killik. Let them place the blame on us, not knowing that we seek to stop the greater evil."
"We will defend ourselves. Many of the Colony will die."
"But it is a necessary sacrifice," UnuThul declared without hesitation. "Sacrifice is what a Jedi would do. Sacrifice is what the Unu will do. Trade a greater evil for a lesser evil, a life for a life. The Killik will return to the galaxy. We shall grow, we shall spread chaos, and all will be right again."

[o-o-[II]-o-o]

The heavy heels of dark black boots echoed loudly in the passageway hewn from the dark gray rocky cliff. A single figure sauntered atop the worn, dust-covered flagstones, knowing that others were already aware of her presence. In one hand she held her orange-red yorik coral and lambent crystal lightsaber, in the other the decapitated head of the one who had tried to bar her way.

It had taken her several months of adventuring to reach her destination, several months of exploring the darkest parts of the galaxy and her own soul, to find what she had been looking for. Several months of searching for a purpose, a way to protect those she cared for from the things that went bump in the night.

Her tiresome work had paid off, culminating in a very one-sided battle against a hive of pirates over the planet Ziost. After initially being shot down by said pirates, she had stumbled upon a very ancient ship embedded in the remains of a Sith temple. The ship worked, was nearly sentient, and had enabled her to engage in one of her favorite past times, the wanton massacre of those that deserved it. Needless to say, her life had been far from boring since then.

The recently beheaded door guard was a testament of her confidence and enjoyment of her new found freedom.

Passing through the length of dimly lit corridors, she finally reached the main chamber. She paused for a moment at the doorway, and then entered the room with several decisive steps. Once all eyes were on her, she rolled the severed head towards the middle of the room. It clamored noisily across the ground, stopping and revealing a pair of white eyes, wide in shock and anger, and staring vacantly up at the low ceiling.

"Oh?" A deep voice said with some amusement. A single figure, dark brown skin corrupted by the dark side, sat on a stone throne on the

opposite side of the chamber. A mask covered his face, and he wore a set of very ancient-looking armor. Yet, there was no mistaking the sheer power radiating from him. "It appears the Sith Intelligence and Assassination bureau is in need of a new head. Twi'lek, tell me now why I should not have you killed for slaying one of my most trusted advisors?"
"You have a vacancy in your ranks," the intruder, gesturing to the head. "I'm here to fill that vacancy. Kill me, and the position goes unfilled. Simple as that."
"Amusing. What is your name?"
"Alema, Alema Rar," the Twi'lek grinned darkly. "You might have heard of me. I am responsible for the deaths of several Jedi. Even have a bounty on my head. Last time I checked, it was nearing a million credits."
The deep voice appeared far from impressed. "And tell me 'Alema Rar,' what makes you think you're worthy of being my personal assassin and chief information gatherer? Murder of the job's last holder is hardly a ringing endorsement. Anyone can kill."
"True, but unlike him, I know the Jedi and their weaknesses. I know what drives them. But more than that, I am not afraid of the dark side or what it is capable of. I want the power to shape this galaxy, my lord. Shape it so that my friends never have to suffer injustice due to the petty actions of small minded people. The Jedi do not have that power, they are weak and short sighted. But the Sith, the Sith have more than enough strength to make that dream come true. To keep the galaxy whole." She placed a hand on her canted hip and flicked her lekku as she continued to address her audience. "No doubt the reason why you are holed up here in this tomb is because you or your advisors want to bide your time. To build up your strength and strike when the galaxy is at its weakest. But what better time to make your rise than now? The Jedi Order is still in its fledgling state, the galaxy is still in chaos after the war, and it will take years to rebuild itself. Why not act and rebuild it in the image of your pleasing? Why wait decades or even centuries to come out of hiding when the galaxy can scarcely afford another conflict? No one has the strength to oppose you now, my lord. Skywalker has been relegated to a position of uselessness. Anakin Solo has been exiled from the galaxy because of his naivety. We have the means, and the power. I say now is the moment to act, to begin the rise of a new era."
A booming laugh filled the chamber as dark amusement radiated out from the Sith Lord she was addressing. "This creation is of your

making, Vergere? One of the two you were boasting about. She has to be, to be so twisted in the mind. I would know."
The holographic image of the Fosh Force user inclined her head. "*A rather lovely little thing, is she not? But she is correct. There are no Jedi capable of standing against you should you act. At least not yet.*"
"Hello again, Vergere," Alema bowed mockingly, not at all surprised by the Fosh's presence. "I believe it is your move."
"*Indeed. A well-played move, Alema Rar. There may be some hope for you yet."*
"Enough. Darth Wyyrlock, as my Voice, your counsel is always appreciated. What say you to her idea?"
The red-skinned Chagrian placed a hand on his chest and bowed his head. "Your will is my own, Darth Krayt, therefore I shall do what you command. But my lord, think of your own strength, therefore I would still advise patience. The galaxy will still be ready for the taking in a century, therefore we will have had that much longer to plan your rise. In that same time you will continue to absorb the power of Korriban and grow stronger yet. It is an undeniable fact that the Sith will be all the more powerful if we wait, therefore I must insist we kill this interloper and be done with the matter."
"Coward," Alema scoffed, spinning on the heel of her boot towards the Chargrian. "You have power, but you are too cowardly to use it, Darth Wyyrlok. That is the difference between yourself and your master. Between yourself and me. Darth Krayt will gather more strength from Korriban, yes. But he will also waste away while the galaxy becomes strong again. While the galaxy rebuilds and the Jedi Order becomes that much harder to eliminate. Sure you can wait and take a gamble on the state of the galaxy in the far future. But in that time so many things could happen. If given even a century, the Jedi Order has the potential to become even stronger than the last. Given a century, and alliances built during this war will become that much harder to break. The Sith can stay on this planet, biding their time and building up their power, but the galaxy will not stay in its broken state for long."
"There is a difference between cowardice and wisdom," the Chargrian scowled. "wanton destruction and warfare is not the same as having power, therefore we are in obvious disagreement, Twi'lek. There will truly be no one capable of challenging my Lord when the time comes for him to act. I may not be around to see the day that the Sith rise to power, but I will take solace in knowing that I have served at my Lord's side and helped to make that day possible. Therefore, I shall continue to advise caution, patience, and modera…"

"Where's the passion?" Alema snarled, shaking her head and throwing up her hands. "You're a Sith, aren't you? Don't give me that 'moderation' fodder, you sound like a Jedi when you say something like that. We became Sith because we all have a passion for something. *My* passion is to see a galaxy that is whole, free of the strife and treachery that plague it to this day. *Your* passion, this new Sith Order you want, won't ever be more than a dream if you don't have the strength to step up and create it. All of you," Alema turned towards the gathered figures and holograms in the chamber. "You all want a Sith Order, right? One ruled by someone strong enough to make a difference? What's the point in having all your power, all your experiences and suffering, if you're just going to waste away in this tomb?" She glanced towards Darth Krayt. "My lord, as wise as your Voice is, he is also cowardly, lacking the true passion it takes to be a Sith. If you allow me to serve you, I can promise to make your dreams a reality."
Darth Krayt, his face hidden behind a mask, rested his chin on a fist. "Is that so?"
"*I for one agree with her plan*," a hologram of a nebulous figure appearing to be made up of nothing but space and stars stated, cutting off Wyyrlok's retort. *"Admiral Daala has been convinced to add her forces to my own, and my cloning projects and experiments can be deployed whenever we wish. I do not want to wait much longer for our return."*
"As do I," an older Zabrak woman said, her long black fingernails steepling together. Despite her diminutive size, the bulky forms of several Force-sensitive, corrupted, Felucian chiefs submissively waited behind her on bended knee. "I say it is time to set the wheels of change in motion once more." She ran a hand over the mask of one of the chiefs almost affectionately. "Let loose my Brood and they will swiftly cleanse the galaxy of your enemies."
The deep voice of Wyyrlock's master laughed again. "Lord Cronal, Lady Brood, if I wanted advice from people who have already been defeated by the Jedi of this infant order, by a single Jedi, I would have asked you."
Both bowed their heads and took a step back.
"My lord." A Yuuzhan Vong emerged from the many shadowy alcoves of the chamber. A cybernetic eye glowed in the dimly lit room. Behind her, several Yuuzhan Vong warriors in priestly clothing stayed prostrated on the ground, while robed Slayers stood watch.
"Speak, Vongerella."
"My lord, I too wish to have my revenge on the *Jeedai*. They have killed my only reason for living, and I desire to return the favor. This Alema

Rar's plan has merit. The Yuuzhan Vong have depleted the galaxy of manpower, of ships. The Jedi Order is stretched thin and vulnerable with no strong leader. There is conflict between them and the main government. It will not take long to topple them."
"I say we kill them all! They aren't real Jedi anyways," crackled a rather mad-sounding human male. A group of dark side corrupted individuals behind him laughed maddeningly along with him. "We have the power, oh yes! Sweet power! I say we slice them to bits! Bits and pieces!"
"You will no doubt take pleasure in doing so, Dark Lord of Ternaax." Darth Krayt appeared amused as he glanced at his subordinates. "So it sounds as if all but Darth Wyyrlok and myself desires war."
"*We do not desire war,"* Vergere commented mildly. *"Merely a change in the hypocritical way this galaxy is run. Even then, my apprentice and I will remain on the outskirts of whatever conflict should arise. We have our own Sith Lords to groom and believe that the logic behind the Rule of Two is sound."*
"That does sound like you, Vergere," Alema nodded. "Using excuses and ancient thinking, living in the past."
"*Indeed*," the murky image of Lord Cronal said. "*You can either stand with us or against us, Vergere. If you stand in our way, you will be swept aside with all the other Jedi. A new era is dawning and you will find your future much brighter under Darth Krayt."*
"Lord Cronal, I will not remind you again," Darth Krayt said with lethal softness. "The ultimate decision lies with me. Acting rashly, solely with one's passion, will only lead to your downfall in the end."
"Forgive me, my lord."
Darth Krayt observed Alema from his throne with glittering intelligent eyes, his posture slowly straightening. His dark side corrupted eyes appeared to see into her very soul. "You are an interesting character, Alema Rar. Your mind and thoughts are clouded and I have to concentrate to see you."
"Interesting traits for an assassin, no?" Alema folded her arms over her chest. "So, my lord. What say you to my proposal? You allow me to take the place of headless White Eyes there, and I will help you change this galaxy for the better."
Darth Krayt gestured with a single hand, sounding both incredulous but amused at the same time. "You are indeed an interesting person, Alema Rar. You show up here unannounced during the first Sith Council meeting in several millennia, kill one of my trusted advisors, and then go on to assume that you can serve under me and still dictate a plan of action. For argument's sake. Let's say I refuse you. Let's say I continue my plan and wait for the Jedi Order to destroy itself once more. You say

the galaxy is weak at the moment and that the Order is fragmented. Will not presenting them a common enemy unite them once more? Will our emergence not solidify alliances and strengthen bonds? The Jedi Order may be weak, but they are far from harmless."
"My lord," Alema said with a sly smile. "If done right, we can easily destroy those bonds without even revealing ourselves. They are new alliances that can be broken just as quickly as they had been created. I do not assume to tell *you* to do anything. I am simply informing the members of this council the state of the galaxy at the moment. We can strike now, while the galaxy is weak. Or take a gamble and assume that in a century or so the galaxy will get even weaker, and not stronger. Bear in mind, it took nearly a thousand years, an army of millions, a Sith Lord as Chancellor, and a galactic war for the last Jedi Order to fall. Do you all truly wish to wait that long, to wait until the Jedi are even stronger?"
Silence filled the room as all eyes darted towards the large, imposing figure of Darth Krayt. The masked Sith Lord finally nodded slowly, placing his hands on the armrests of his chair and rising.
"Very well. You wish to serve me? Then it is time I show you your place."
Faster than anyone could even register, a blast of Sith Lightning hit the unprepared Alema with the strength of an avalanche. Alema was dropped to the ground in an instant, a scream of pain tearing free from her throat. Krayt approached her with an apathetic air, keeping the lightning on her until her body began to scar from it. Only then did he relent.
"Rise," Darth Krayt commanded, gesturing with a single hand.
On shaky legs, with her skin still steaming from the attack, Alema did so. Both her eyes were completely yellow, and the entire right side of her face and right shoulder was disfigured from the blistering attack. The black glyphs she had tattooed herself with stood out even more against her darkened blue skin.
Darth Krayt stepped forward and gripped her chin in a single, powerful hand, his presence oppressive and dark as he effortlessly lifted her off her feet. "Do not think for once that you stand a chance against my power. That my throne is yours for the taking, or that you will get away with manipulating me. Namman Cha made the mistake of claiming that he was the rightful Sith Lord, but has since learned his place, haven't you?"
The Sith Lord turned Alema's head so that she could see a human male emerge from another alcove. Dressed in shades of dark red, with his face painted in reds and whites, what stood out about this man was

that, up to his eyes, the entire right half of his body was cybernetic. As if he had been cleaved in two by a lightsaber and then welded onto the mechanical devices that kept him alive. The man's hate and malice were unmistakable, his source of power and reason for living, but he too knelt before Darth Krayt.
"As you say, my Lord. You are all powerful."
"It is fortunate your Nightsister allies were wiser than you," Darth Krayt tilted his head towards the white and red painted faces of the armored Dathomiri dark-siders behind Namman. The figures all bent down on one knee in unison, piercing red eyes gleaming in the darkness of the room. Krayt turned his attention back to Alema. "Obedience and loyalty is rewarded, treachery and foolish betrayals are punished most severely."
When Darth Krayt released Alema, she lowered herself to one knee and bowed her head, mimicking the stances of Krayt's followers without delay. "Command me, Master."
"A quick learner, good." Darth Krayt nodded in approval. "From this moment forward, you shall cease being Alema Rar. Instead, you shall be my Night Herald; readying the galaxy for the change we will bring. You will help me create a galaxy free of the ailments that have plagued cycles past. You will go to every shadow, enhance every doubt and widen every conflict. Darkness shall be your ally, chaos shall be your goal. The message you shall bring is not one of peace, but of change—violent change. All of my resources are at your disposal, and all who refuse to side with us shall be swept aside. Go now. Go and prepare the galaxy for the return of the Sith."
[o-o-[FiN]-o-o]
A\N: Cue Imperial March theme and fade away to the credits =). All finished now. As this Epilogue shows, the sequel will focus on three baddies, the Killiks, Sith, and Abeloth, and is projected to be about as long as this story. I hope to be in a position to begin posting it late next year, but that date's very up in the air.
Minor grammar/spelling edits: 6-20-2013
Anon review responses:
Pollyanna Anon- Never thought I'd see pollyanna used in a sentence =). They're probably bonding while getting worked on in the med-bay, you know to pass the time while the healers patch them up: 'Sorry I didn't mean to stab you like that. On the bright side, you'll have a wicked looking scar.' 'No worries, I'm really sorry for blasting your arm off, though. Do Vong really replace missing limbs with animal claws?' Hey, it might be a little unrealistic, but this is S*tar Wars.*It can't have

been any worse than my Wizard of Oz references the previous story arc.
New Canon Anon- If only it were true canon *sigh*. It also means that I can no longer go back to the books to refresh myself on things that have happened in canon, I've kind of strayed a bit away from that.
Octavius Haye- Thanks again for following this story all the way through, and your multiple reviews. I kind of wanted Luke phased out of the Jedi Order doings because his time has definitely passed. He'll stay on as a teacher and advisor, but that's it. Hope you can wait a bit, the sequel won't be for a long while =P